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AUTHOR Martinez, Paul
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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to share the experiences of 25 British further education colleges and adult education services that have developed demonstrably successful strategies to improve student retention. An introduction discusses the report's background, content, and format. The format mixes thematic presentation with mini-case studies and substantial, illustrative documentation. The broad thematic structure of the report (chapters 2-13) is organized around these issues: successful outcomes of retention strategies; management of the process, that is, how the colleges got started and who took the lead; how pre-enrollment issues were managed; initial student assessment that worked best in matching students to courses; identification of students at risk of dropping out; induction and student motivation as methods to help students settle in; the role of tutoring; curriculum strategies for retention, including curriculum audit, course development, curriculum structure and timetabling, learning support, and learning to learn; how teachers can improve and develop their courses; other effective support provided to students, including direct costs of study, financial advice, travel costs, child care costs, and counseling services; student tracking and followup, including manual, manual and computerized, and computerized systems; and resource allocation and target setting. Chapter 14 summarizes important points by chapter. Appendixes contain 60 references and index. (YLB)

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Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies

Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Martinez spent four years teaching in universities and five years working in Sheffield successively as Principal Benefits Officer, Marketing Director and, lastly, as Education Officer: Tertiary Programme and Planning. He joined the then Staff College in 1992 as Staff Tutor in the curriculum management and marketing team. He is the author of two previous publications on student retention and is currently leading two large research projects on it. Special interests include: organisational development and learning; student participation, retention and achievement; standards-based management development. He is a member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

Published by the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA),
Dumbarton House, 68 Oxford Street, London W1N 0DA
Tel: [0171] 436 0020 Fax: [0171] 436 0349

Feedback and orders should be directed to:
Publications Department, FEDA, Coombe Lodge, Blagdon, Bristol BS18 6RG
Tel: [01761] 462 503 Fax: [01761] 463 140

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Executive summary

The great majority of colleges and adult education services in Britain are seeking to improve student retention rates. A minority of colleges and services have been applying strategies to do this for several years. This guide is based on the experience of over 20 services and colleges which have achieved demonstrable improvements in a variety of ways.

Reflecting the diversity of issues, histories, local context and student populations, successful retention strategies vary considerably between organisations. Broadly speaking, three types of initiative can be identified:

- curriculum
- support
- managerial.

Curriculum initiatives include a diverse group of interventions which extend from fundamental changes to curriculum strategy (unitisation, open and flexible learning, development of learning support and learning to learn) to a huge variety of changes at programme and course level. Other curriculum initiatives include initial assessment, induction and steps to improve student motivation, tutoring, and curriculum audit and review (strategic marketing).

Effective support strategies include measures to provide financial, child care, transport and other types of learner support; improvements to information and guidance services; and systems to identify and support 'at-risk' students.

Changes in resource allocation systems, the development of whole college and whole service retention strategies, the introduction of procedures to agree, monitor and take corrective action to achieve retention targets, enhancement of student tracking and management information (MIS) systems, all fall in the third grouping of managerial initiatives.

The outcomes of these strategies provide strong support for the view that student experience has a significant influence on decisions to persist or withdraw and, moreover, that the combined efforts of all staff can make a substantial difference. Quite dramatic improvements (up to 10%) can be achieved in relatively short periods of time (one-to-two years). Further, even where completion rates are already very high, there may well be some scope for improvement. This guide confirms, finally, a generally accepted principle of learning: the process is at least as important as the outcome. While there are broad themes and general messages which emerge from this activity, no two strategies are the same. None of the colleges or adult education services whose work is reviewed here has developed a fully comprehensive strategy which includes every possible dimension of curriculum, support and managerial change. What is common, however, is that all have undertaken a similar process. This can be summarised as:

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- identification of student non-completion as an issue
- investigation of the specific causes of non-completion among the organisation's own students
- development and application of retention strategies across the whole or part of the organisation
- evaluation of progress
- continuing development and refinement of retention strategies.

1. Introduction

The objective of this guide is quite straightforward: to share the experience of a number of colleges which have developed demonstrably successful strategies to improve student retention.

I have discussed a general framework for thinking about student retention elsewhere (*Factors affecting student retention* Martinez, 1995). This FEDA report also follows an FE Matters volume *Student retention: case studies of strategies that work* which discusses in some detail four case studies of successful retention projects (Martinez, 1996). The questions therefore arise, why this report now, why this content and why this format?

BACKGROUND

The answers to these questions, relating in part to internal and in part to external factors, affect virtually all colleges and most freestanding adult and community education services in the United Kingdom.

The internal factors are complex and it is difficult to do them justice in an introduction. Essentially, they comprise issues around:

- differential competition within the FE sector
- organisational cultures, teacher expectations and teaching strategies
- changing concepts of teacher professionalism
- changing concepts of managerial professionalism.

Student retention has a different resonance in different types of organisation. Sixth-form colleges are, in the main, not so much exercised by the numbers of students who withdraw from college altogether as by the numbers of students who withdraw from (or change) individual components of their programmes of study. Adult education (AE) services and those parts of colleges which cater for adult part-time student populations tend quite naturally to focus on the specific needs of their students (reviewed notably by V. McGivney, 1996). By contrast most tertiary and many FE colleges have tended to focus their attention on poor attendance and withdrawal from college by younger, full-time students.

Issues of culture and teacher expectations are difficult and elusive. An exhaustive treatment would be inappropriate here. Almost everyone I have worked with in the preparation of this report agrees about their significance, but disagrees about the local issues to be addressed. At the risk of gross oversimplification, these seem to revolve around the ability of staff and managers to review, question and, if necessary, change deeply held beliefs and values in the light of changed circumstances. This can be illustrated by four personal anecdotes. In several different colleges I have encountered a mixture of

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discomfort and disorientation among some vocational lecturers. They regret intensely the decline of day-release and the consequent loss of employer sanctions on poor attendance/completion. In one particular instance, poor student outcomes had initially been attributed to difficulties in maths. The situation did not improve despite substantial additional maths support. On reflection, the issue seemed to be closely linked to the expectations of two experienced teachers. They had developed teaching strategies which had been successful for earlier generations of apprentice engineers but which were not working effectively with the students now enrolling on these courses.

By way of contrast, a number of colleagues in sixth-form colleges have identified a particular cultural issue among some of their teachers. In the main, these staff have no problem at all with notions of pedagogic excellence, close monitoring of student performance and a commitment to caring for all aspects of student growth and development. On the other hand, while their reactions to new approaches to quality and continuous improvement may take a variety of forms, there is an underlying reluctance to acknowledge students as customers.

The third example, and the one which I personally found most difficult, arises from training inputs in two large inner-city colleges. My task was to share the outcomes of earlier research on student retention (the problem) and the experience of several colleges (some possible solutions). The reaction of whole college groups of teachers could be expressed as a mixture of five 'D's':

- denial: we are doing as well as expected
- displacement: it's not our fault; it's the fault of management/government/students/the local context
- disbelief: the research is wrong
- despair: we can't do anything about student retention
- determination: we can and will do something to improve student retention.

In a large tertiary college, finally, which has successfully implemented a college-wide and very determined student retention strategy, the shared perception was that over a period of some three years, the culture had changed. This was articulated most strongly by staff previously employed in schools. They reported their initial surprise at the attitude of some of their new colleagues who disclaimed any major role in influencing student attendance or outcomes on the basis that FE was not compulsory and it was therefore up to students whether they chose to attend or not.

Taken together, the four anecdotes suggest quite strongly that cultures and teacher expectations are significant, deeply imbedded, value laden and can change, but that such change is a difficult and sensitive process.

Issues of culture and teacher expectation are closely linked to changing concepts of teacher professionalism. The change in emphasis from teachers teaching to students learning, from a stress on the excellence of delivery to the management of process, in short from passive to active learning, has been too widely discussed in educational literature to need reiteration here (for a recent account, see C. Mitchell, 1997).

The corollary – changing concepts of managerial professionalism – does, however, require some discussion. In the context of restructuring, delayering, and the devolution of ever more onerous managerial accountabilities throughout colleges and other education services, there has been an understandable stress on the new and more intensive demands made on managers. Two different attitudes have emerged. On the one hand, there is a growing insistence on performance management, the fulfilment of targets and managerial capability and competency. This fits quite uncomfortably, however, with concepts of teacher professionalism and so has given rise on the other hand to a critique of the ‘new managerialism’ of FE. In this debate the baby that seems to have been thrown out with the bath water is the notion of pedagogic and professional leadership.

Externally, the combined pressures for increased accountability (inspection) and funding (emphasis on student outcomes) continue to bear down. These pressures have a particular form at the time of writing and can be summarised as:

- changing perceptions of role and mission of FE
- the medium-term funding outlook
- the new inspection framework in England and parallel developments in Scotland and Wales
- changing thresholds of competition.

Irrespective of the declared positions of the major political parties, we can identify a consensus around the role and mission of FE driven largely by economic and political considerations and informed by reference to international comparators. This consensus will continue to emphasise the role of FE in supporting economic restructuring and local regeneration and meeting labour market requirements in a way which is (compared with HE) relatively low in cost.

In terms of funding, the restriction on public finances will tend to shift the emphasis away from expansion (more new students) towards more successful and better managed (and hence more predictable) outcomes for a broadly static number of students. This will apply in equal measure both to colleges and to adult and community education services either directly (restriction of FE funds) or indirectly (local political emphasis on accountability and demonstrable outcomes).

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Within the college sector, the movement towards self assessment has initially focused attention on well-documented, managed and embedded quality systems. The next phase (already developing in many colleges) will tend to shift the focus away from control to improvement issues, and hence the inextricably intertwined themes of student retention and achievement.

The changing nature of thresholds for competition has not, to date, been the subject of sustained discussion in educational writing although it is well documented in the management literature developed from experience in industry and commerce. Expressed in its simplest form, it is the notion that driven by inter and intra industry competition, the terms of entry and success in different sectors evolve over time. To cite one example, the great Japanese success story in manufacturing over the last forty years can be characterised as a revolution in manufacturing processes designed to deliver an ever wider range of reliable products satisfying the needs of larger and more diverse groups of customers. In so doing, the initial terms of competition (reasonable to low quality at low cost) were transformed to high quality at low cost. There is an almost exact parallel in the FE context, where competition in terms of the quality of promotional activity, the breadth and depth of the curriculum offer and the ability to serve identifiable local or regional market niches, is being superseded by competition in terms of student outcomes.

Quality, funding and accountability issues come together at this point. The school improvement movement already relies quite heavily on a relatively simple and robust methodology to plot differential outcomes against indices of educational and socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission and OFSTED 1993) and *Measuring Achievement* (FEFC, 1997a) are only the precursors of two major trends. First, some colleges will be asked ever more pointed questions as to why – given apparently similar student profiles – their retention and achievement rates are less good than other colleges. Secondly, systematic efforts by colleges to respond to this way of measuring and comparing performance, will have the effect of raising expectations across the sector.

To return to the questions posed at the beginning of this introduction, why this report now, why this content and why this format?

TIMING, CONTENT AND FORMAT

Broadly speaking, the current situation in respect of student retention is this: there is a wide variety of college experience. At one end of the spectrum there is a significant number of colleges and adult education services which acknowledge that they need to address student retention but are uncertain about the nature and extent of local issues and how they might make progress. FEFA has been leading a large consultancy-based project involving some 37 colleges in England and Wales which is designed to assist such colleges in identifying the local causes of student persistence and drop out.

At the other end of the spectrum, in a number of colleges (either across the whole college or in particular programme areas or course teams), teachers and managers have been working on student retention issues for several years; they have experimented with a range of strategies and are now in a position to review that experience. The objectives in relation to the content of this report can now be stated in more detail. They are to:

- report successful strategies which are relevant to a wide variety of colleges and adult education services
- inform and support a process of cultural change and evolution through a wealth of case study and empirical material
- provide practical concepts, materials and tools to enrich our concepts of good practice in promoting student retention.

Turning to the external context, the objectives are to:

- support colleges and adult education services in their search to achieve greater effectiveness in the delivery of their role and mission
- provide practical examples of ways of increasing efficiency expressed in terms of student outcomes (or to use the language of industry: to reduce the costs of 'wastage' and 'failure')
- illustrate some hands-on approaches that very different colleges and services have developed to identify issues (self assessment) and make changes (continuous improvement)
- identify the way in which some colleges have succeeded in addressing new – and more demanding – thresholds for competition, expressed in terms of student outcomes.

The focus of this report is student retention and drop-out in further and adult education. This is for two main reasons:

- 1 There are obvious and self-evident continuities in curriculum provision and student populations between these two sectors. Indeed, there is considerable overlap between their agendas as manifested, for example, in the submissions to, and report issued by, the Kennedy Committee (FEFC, 1997c).
- 2 Retention issues in higher education (whether in universities or as discrete provision in colleges) fall outside the scope of this report. While there is certainly some interesting work on student retention (see McGivney, 1996), the special features of the higher education student population, curriculum offer, and specific higher education agendas, imply that retention issues in higher education require a separate study.

With this dual focus (adult and further education) and to avoid wearying the reader by repetition, I will generally use the term college to include adult education services and centres. Where I depart from this general practice, it will be obvious in the context of the report.

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There is no specific discussion in this report of staff development. Given the internal issues discussed above and the centrality of student-teacher relationships, this omission might seem extraordinary. In fact, staff development is so complex, difficult and important that a separate report is being prepared: Staff Development for Student Retention. Staff development issues are relevant to a number of the strategies reviewed here and form a sub-text to this report, even if they are not placed within an explicit discussion of initial teacher training, induction and continuing professional development.

DEFINITIONS

As in earlier work, I treat the terms persistence, completion and retention as more or less synonymous as I do their opposites – drop-out, non-completion and early withdrawal. Unless otherwise specified, early withdrawal or drop-out means students who do not complete the courses or programmes of study for which they originally enrolled and who leave college. Successful completion, therefore, includes those students who complete their courses/programmes, even if they do not achieve their qualification aims. Non-completion includes all students who fail to complete, irrespective of their reasons, and includes students who leave because of a change in their employment status.

Because of the different concerns of participating colleges, I have extended the discussion of drop-out and persistence to include the outcomes of those processes which take place from initial contact, throughout application, guidance and interviewing to enrolment.

For similar reasons, and where indicated, the discussion will also include students who may have withdrawn from a course, but not from a college. These are students who may drop only part of their programme or who transfer from one course to another. Such transfers or programme changes may not have funding implications, but they are relevant to the concerns of teachers and managers working to improve retention.

The implications of the above are that the quantitative data presented here will not be directly comparable to data gathered by the English Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) based on the individual student record (ISR) (and published in part in *Measuring Achievement*, 1997a). The data will, in fact, look worse since it reflects outcomes in relation to initial enrolments, rather than in relation to status on the first FEFC census date: 1 November. The argument for this approach is overwhelming, however, in that it reflects the actual concerns and experiences of students, teachers and managers in the adult and further education sectors.

FORMAT

Given the fairly ambitious nature of the objectives for this report, the format used here is a mixture of thematic presentation interspersed with mini-case studies and the use of substantial, illustrative documentation. The report reviews the experience of some 25 colleges and adult education services. An exclusive reliance on a case-study approach would tend to obscure the woods through a detailed consideration of the trees, boughs and perhaps even twigs.

The thematic presentation is, therefore, supported by an extensive index which will facilitate cross-referencing of individual strategies to types of organisation and local context.

STRUCTURE

The broad thematic structure of the report is organised around the following questions:

- How successful were the strategies?
- How did colleges get started and who took the lead?
- How did they manage pre-enrolment issues?
- What worked best in terms of matching students to courses?
- Can we identify groups of particularly vulnerable students?
- What was most successful in terms of helping students to settle in?
- How did colleges match courses to students?
- What is the role of tutoring?
- How did colleges develop their curriculum strategies?
- How did teachers improve and develop their courses?
- Was any other support provided to students effective?
- How did colleges change or adapt their monitoring and follow-up arrangements?
- What changes were introduced to resourcing retention strategies?

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A NOTE ON METHOD

FEDA has been working with student retention issues over the last four years. During this time, we have organised a number of conferences, seminars and projects. A database has been created of some 600 individuals who are interested in and/or working on student retention issues in adult and further education.

In May 1996 I wrote to all the individuals on the database and to all the college senior curriculum managers in England and Wales inviting them to participate in this project. The criteria for inclusion were quite simple:

- a record of development work on improving student retention
- demonstrably successful outcomes arising from that work.

Colleges selected for inclusion have presented their work at a number of conferences held between October 1996 and June 1997. This report is, effectively, a presentation of their work and they are collectively referred to as 'project colleges'. In addition, I refer to successful work in colleges and adult education services about which I have learned over the last twelve months.

The limits of this report are two-fold. It does not pretend to be exhaustive. I hope that you will use the *pro forma* inserted in this report to tell me about work which you have been doing and, indeed, take issue with me if I have got things wrong. Equally, this is work in progress: it is not complete; it provides evidence of substantial progress and there is much more to do. If I meet the objectives set out in this introduction, the report will make some contribution to this process.

2. Outcomes of retention strategies

Perhaps the most important single question we can ask is: does it work? We know the theory; we have looked at our own and others research; but is this validated by demonstrably successful outcomes from different student retention strategies?

The list below records the outcomes identified by the participating colleges and adult education services:

AMERSHAM AND WYCOMBE COLLEGE

Focus: introduction of a modular Access course for the caring professions.

Outcomes: student completion and achievements in relation to enrolments has varied between 86% and 93% over the last four years.

BARNET COLLEGE

Focus: full-time courses.

Outcomes: completion rates increased from 81% to 91%, on average, across all programme areas.

BEXLEY COLLEGE

Focus: 1,800 full-time students.

Outcomes: 10% improvement in retention rates for students with identified needs for learning support; 25% improvement in achievement rates (passes/enrolments) and 37% increase in pass rates (passes/completions) for the same students.

CITY AND ISLINGTON COLLEGE

Focus: mentoring scheme for black, full-time students.

Outcomes: 90% of students within the mentoring programme completed their courses (1994/5); since its inception, over 300 mentor students have progressed to university.

CROYDON CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING SERVICE (CETS)

Focus: 20,000, mostly part-time, students on 2,000 courses.

Outcomes: 25% reduction in course closure rates over three years; 9% increase in retention rates in language classes where specific retention strategies were piloted.

GRIMSBY COLLEGE

Focus: Faculty of Continuing Education.

Outcomes: improvements of between 5% and 10% in areas where retention rates have historically been poor (e.g. GCSE evening classes).

HARTLEPOOL COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Focus: full-time students in Business Studies Department.

Outcomes: over a three-year period (1992-5) achievement and retention rates improved across the department; very high retention rates achieved of up to 100% for some two-year courses.

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HASTINGS COLLEGE OF ARTS & TECHNOLOGY

Focus: 160 students in the Health and Social Care sector.

Outcomes: Over three years, completion rates increased from 65% to 85%.

KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA COLLEGE

Focus: a combination of whole-college strategies and initiatives within specific curriculum areas.

Outcomes: comprehensive pre-course advice and guidance, diagnostic testing and interview and selection procedures to identify student level have resulted in 83% retention on GCSE and 80% retention on A-level languages courses, where drop-out is a national issue.

KNOWSLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Focus: all full-time students.

Outcomes: overall completion rates increased from some 75% to 82.5% (1994/5); approximately £200k income saved.

LAMBETH COLLEGE

Focus: 8,000 full and part time students.

Outcomes: at incorporation, average completion rates were 66% across the college; they are now (1995/6) 80%.

LOUGHBOROUGH COLLEGE

Focus: GNVQ intermediate business studies.

Outcomes: in 1995/6 – 86% completion rates; 100% pass rate.

OLDHAM YOUTH AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION SERVICE

Focus: Access courses.

Outcomes: retention rates on 35-week advanced level Access courses have increased to between 58 and 60% (1995-6); the average retention rates across all 18 week courses has increased by 10% to 84%; student evaluations have been positive with high levels of satisfaction being expressed for relevance, clarity, support from tutors, enjoyment, learning, discussion and debates.

PASTON SIXTH-FORM COLLEGE

Focus: full-time students, mostly on two-year A-level programmes but with a cohort of students on GNVQ and NVQ programmes.

Outcomes: in 1995/6 – 91% overall retention rate; 85%-90% compliance with pre-enrolment procedures.

PLYMOUTH COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Focus: all full-time students.

Outcomes: average retention rates across the college in 1994/5 were 78%; the target for 1995/6 was 83% and the actual was 85%; the college saved approximately £150k income.

SOLIHULL COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Focus: full- and part time students in the engineering department.

Outcomes: average completion rates on the range of GNVQ courses over 90%; broad and varied portfolio of qualifications on offer; by comparison with the college average, engineering teachers generate over 50% more funding units per teaching hour.

SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE

Focus: 650 full-time adult students.

Outcomes: over one year, improvement in retention rates from 75% to 86%; reduction in the numbers of students transferring course from 13% to 8% in the same period; reduction from drop-out from Access courses from 31% to 18%.

STOCKPORT COLLEGE

Focus: 1,000 students in the school of social, health and community care (29% full-time, 71% part-time).

Outcomes: completion rates on first and national certificate courses increased from 71% (1995-6) to 89% (1996-7), and from 40% (1994-6) to 65% (1995-7), respectively.

WESTON COLLEGE

Focus: all full-time students.

Outcomes: 2% increase in completion rates (to 84%). Mainly attributable to student support measures; approximately £180k income saved.

WILBERFORCE SIXTH-FORM COLLEGE

Focus: full-time students mainly on A-level programmes.

Outcomes: Comparing 1995/6 to 1994/5, retention in single year programmes increased from 67.9% to 72.1%; in A-levels (year 1) from 83.7% to 90.0%, (year 2) from 94.2% to 96.2%; in GNVQ Advanced (year 1) retention increased from 71.2% to 73.2%, and in year 2 from 67.8% to 72.1%.

WORTHING SIXTH-FORM COLLEGE

Focus: 1,000 full time students, mainly on two-year A-level courses.

Outcomes: retention rates increased from 92.9% to 94.8% over a two-year period.

WULFRUN COLLEGE

Focus: Two open learning centres, the larger of which is a partnership with Bilston Community College and part funded by Wolverhampton TEC.

Outcomes: over one third of enrolled students progressed to further study (1995-6); completion rates are 80% at one centre and over 73% at the other (the latter represents a 10% improvement over 1995-6).

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3. Management of process

Who took the lead, how did they get going and how were the processes managed? Management literature suggests that ownership by and support from senior managers and a mixed top-down, bottom-up approach are general prerequisites for the successful implementation of change.

The experience of colleges within this project suggests that, in practice, approaches are extremely diverse. The main variations are:

- college or service wide approaches embedded in strategic review, planning and quality systems
- a special project developed either as a consortium of colleges or within individual colleges
- departmental or faculty based approaches relying on the leadership of the departmental head
- initiatives developed by course teams or individual teachers.

Naturally, there are hybrid student retention strategies which combine two or more of these approaches.

Plymouth College adopted the first approach. The College Corporation is involved through defining priorities and the agreement of strategic targets for full time A level point scores and full time vocational retention and pass rates. In January 1995, it adopted the following key statement:

The Corporation commits itself to student success as its overriding strategic priority for the next 3 years.

(Plymouth College of Further Education, 1996).

By reference to the College targets, course teams negotiate targets for enrolment, retention and attainment with their head of department. Course teams continue to review their progress against these targets and produce action plans as part of the curriculum review and evaluation cycle. The Academic Board is charged with monitoring by exception. Programmes with the greatest variance from target (either worse or better retention than anticipated) are evaluated with a view either to taking remedial action or to generalising good practice.

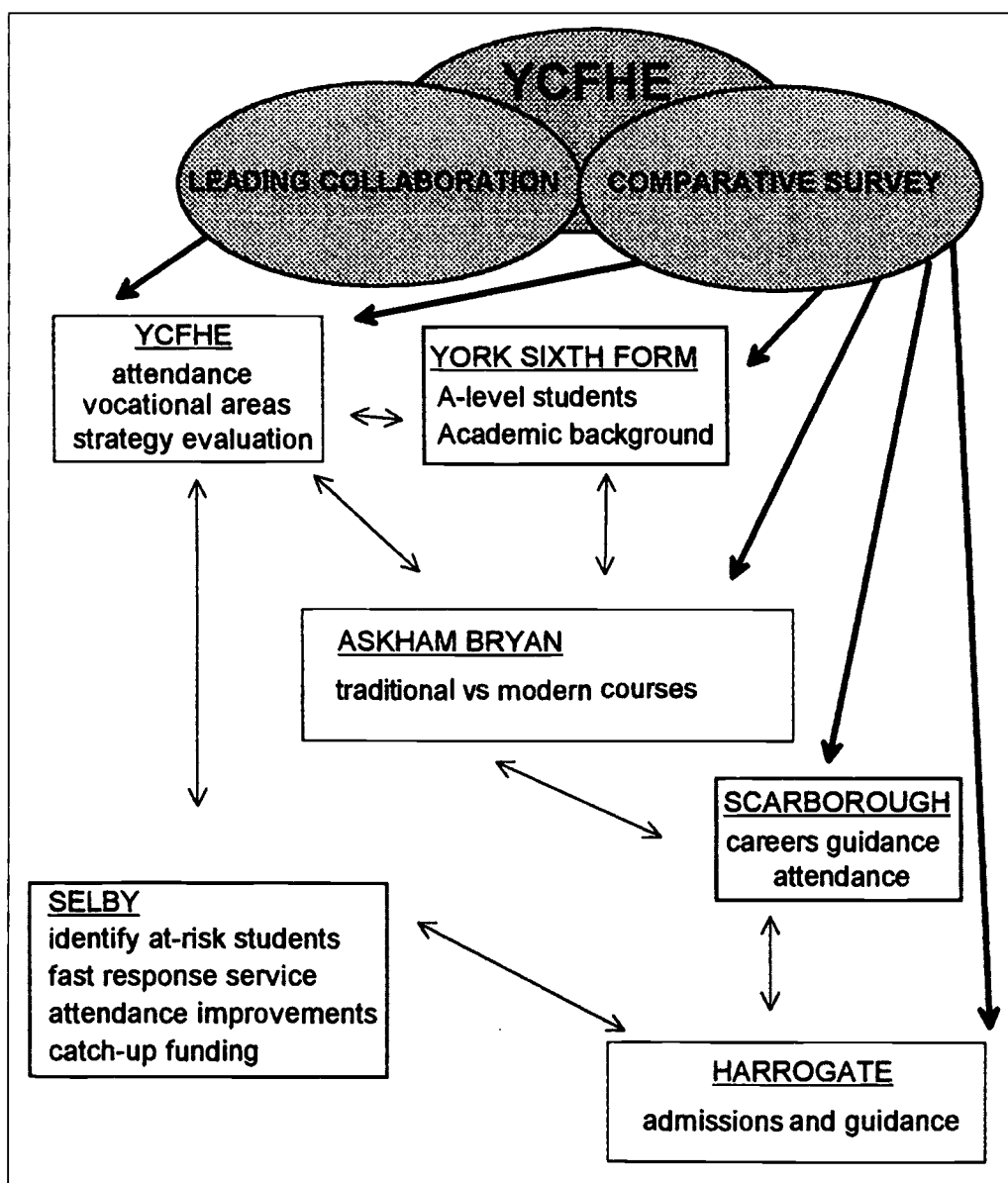
Broadly similar approaches relying on leadership from strategic managers and using existing quality mechanisms and line management relationships as the main vehicles for development were employed by Barnet, Lambeth, North Lincolnshire, Paston, Worthing, Weston, and Wilberforce colleges, Croydon Continuing Education and Training Service (CETS), Kent Adult Education Service and Oldham Youth and Community Education.

Examples of project approaches can be found in North Yorkshire and Tyneside where colleges joined consortia in order to:

- access TEC funding
- share development and project management costs
- establish larger and more reliable databases
- disseminate good practice rapidly
- share out specific action research tasks between participants.

The allocation of tasks and roles within the North Yorkshire Consortium is indicated at Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: COLLEGE ROLES WITHIN NORTH YORKSHIRE CONSORTIUM
H. Kenwright (1996)



Colleges within the two consortia established project management mechanisms internally. The obvious difficulties for a project approach are to strike an appropriate balance between the development role of the project and college maintenance functions, and to ensure that the project succeeds although its task may cut across conventional line management relationships.

The solution developed at Knowsley College is discussed elsewhere (Martinez, 1996). South East Essex College needed to implement a TEC-funded project to improve retention rates among full-time adult students across all programme areas. The project solution was to create a task/management mechanism at four levels:

FIGURE 2: PROJECT MANAGEMENT AT SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE

Project Manager:	the most relevant curriculum line manager
Steering Group:	external stakeholders (including the TEC and the principal of a local adult education service) and internal senior managers (deputy chief executive, directors of marketing, quality and development)
Project Teams:	four teams with different memberships appropriate to the research, implementation or evaluation task of each team and including relevant strategic and operational managers
Research Team:	operational staff who conducted research within the parameters set by the appropriate project teams.

South East Essex College, 1996

By way of contrast, a very straightforward mechanism was implemented in Tameside College where a Retention and Achievement Group was set up. The Group was chaired by the director of marketing (representing the senior management team) and included the director of curriculum, quality manager, two heads of school, two personal tutors, the head of student services and management information systems (MIS) staff.

A number of colleges have set up similar task, action or development groups. Sometimes they appear to have little real impact on retention. At Tameside, the group did not have access to external funding, but worked well partly because of its composition, partly because of the contribution of individual members and partly because it had a clearly defined brief to research, review and make recommendations.

FIGURE 3: TAMESIDE COLLEGE : RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT GROUP

Aim: To raise retention and achievement rates within the College.
Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none">• to review the effectiveness of systems for monitoring retention and achievement and to suggest revision where appropriate• to propose changes to existing college policies and procedures that would increase retention and achievement• to propose policies and procedures that would increase retention and achievement• to note good practice in relation to increasing retention and achievement and to arrange for dissemination to schools• to propose staff development activities where appropriate• to recommend College targets for retention and achievement.

Experience at several other colleges suggests that retention strategies do not necessarily have to be led from the top. In Hartlepool, Hastings, Grimsby, Stockport, Wulfrun and Solihull Colleges, strategies were developed by the Head of Department or Faculty for local application in, respectively, the Business Studies Department, the School of Health and Social Care, the Faculty of Continuing Education, the School of Social, Health and Community Care, the college's open learning centres, and the Department of Engineering. In Loughborough, pioneering work was done by the leader for the GNVQ intermediate business studies programme, which is now being adopted across the college. Very different but equally innovative work was developed at Amersham and Wycombe College by the programme leader for Access to the caring professions. At Bexley, a new process for assessing key skills on entry, with considerable implications across the college, was championed by the co-ordinator responsible for learning support.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from such diverse experience but five inferences suggest themselves:

- The implementation of college-wide retention strategies will need to be led by strategic managers.
- Empirical evidence suggests that such strategies are generally more likely to be inspired by curriculum managers than by quality managers.
- Where project development approaches are adopted, successful implementation will hinge on the careful composition of project teams, and the development of clear and realistic objectives.

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- Strategies can be developed by curriculum managers at different levels but their impact is likely to be limited to the areas controlled by such managers unless they are subsequently championed by senior managers.
- What works best will be highly context specific and will depend on securing a 'fit' between the managerial approach adopted and college structures, processes and people.
- Notwithstanding the very different contexts and different managerial frameworks, each college or adult education service appears to have gone through a similar process:
 - identification of student non-completion as an issue
 - investigation of the specific causes of non-completion among the target groups of students
 - development and application of retention strategies across the whole or part of the organisation
 - evaluation of progress
 - continuing development.

4. Pre-enrolment services

Issues in relation to pre-enrolment services can be expressed as a series of tensions and conflicts as indicated in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: PRE-ENROLMENT SERVICES: TENSIONS AND CONFLICTS

Commitment to open access	v.	Poor student outcomes
Strict entry criteria	v.	Pressures to put 'bums on seats'
Student or parental perceptions of best choice of course	v.	College perceptions of best choice of course
Desire to maintain contact with students following application or other initial enquiry or application	v.	Resource constraints
Impartial information and advice	v.	Need to recruit students to a particular course
Teacher management of pre-enrolment processes	v.	Centralised and standardised advice and guidance services
Creation of universal student entitlement	v.	Creation of differential entitlement by mode of attendance or type of student
Specialisation of functions and systems creating a complex student pathway	v.	Creation of transparent and simple pathway
Monitoring and evaluation of pre-enrolment services	v.	Difficulties around systematic information gathering and monitoring

The change in the way that these issues have been addressed over the last five years is evident from the development and growth of student or customer service functions, the re-focusing of enrolment procedures, the introduction of central admissions units and the transformation of the physical appearance and layout of many college reception areas.

Processes underpinning these developments are less immediately obvious, but have been explored by a number of the colleges participating in this project.

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ENTRY CRITERIA AND STUDENT CHOICE

In the context of capped funding, funding methodology and competition, the issues of entry criteria and student choice are difficult. In general terms, some of the project colleges found that it was helpful to have more explicit entry criteria and to increase the emphasis on compliance. This appears to mirror practice in community colleges in North America where the introduction of compulsory 'remediation' courses (usually in key skills) has gone hand in hand with some restriction on student choice on the basis of entry criteria (Weissman, 1995; Illinois Community College Board, 1995).

Two college examples illustrate this point. At Hartlepool, the lack of employment opportunities sometimes meant that students found themselves on the wrong course, resulting in poor attendance and achievement patterns. Recruitment with integrity was introduced in the department. Although the immediate effect of clearer entry requirements was to decrease group sizes, the long-term effect has been to boost recruitment.

A similar situation arose at South East Essex College with a large cohort of adult full-time students (875 in 1994/5). The retention rate in the same year was 75% and most of the early withdrawal occurred in the first term. Research revealed that a significant number of students were joining inappropriate courses. Entry criteria were introduced as part of a comprehensive and extensive strategy. In the following year, recruitment dipped quite sharply (to 658), but completion rates rose by 10%. Some of the potential recruits were diverted to other courses or modes of attendance, although this was not monitored by the project. Overall, the college felt that the improvement in retention and student satisfaction more than outweighed the immediate costs of lower recruitment, and has created a secure foundation for future development.

Perhaps the most contentious entry criteria issues arise in relation to recruitment of full-time GCSE resit and A-level programmes, where students and parents may have preferences that conflict with college advice. In the light of research that has demonstrated the general unsuitability of full-time GCSE resit programmes, and the relatively stable relationships between GCSE point scores and A-level outcomes (Payne, 1995; Audit Commission and OFSTED, 1993) the general trend is to counsel students away from inappropriate choices, and usually towards GNVQs. Some colleges found that involving parents in the interviewing and guidance processes assists in better informed student decision making.

The issue is pertinent not only to full-time courses intended primarily for younger students. Kensington and Chelsea College caters mainly for adult part-time students; one of its broad strategies is to develop a student specification for all FE courses to underpin selection processes.

FROM INITIAL CONTACT TO ENROLMENT

It is often said that retention starts from the first point of contact when a student asks 'what sort of courses do you offer?'. One of the most fully articulated pre-enrolment strategies has been developed by Paston Sixth-Form College. It has been driven by a consideration of local issues. The college is small (660 students; 580 full-time equivalents - FTEs) but many courses are full. Enrolment therefore needs to be closely monitored to ensure proper curriculum planning and use of scarce staffing resources. The particular dilemma faced by college managers is ensuring the effective management of the process from initial contact to application, from interview to enrolment. Effective management in this context means that:

- students enrol for appropriate courses
- 'failures' in the processes leading to this outcome are minimised.

To achieve these outcomes, the pre-enrolment services have the following annual cycle:

FIGURE 5: ANNUAL CYCLE OF PRE-ENROLMENT SERVICES AT PASTON SIXTH-FORM COLLEGE

July:	Open evening for students and parents in Year 10
November-December:	Presentations to feeder schools
December-January:	Applications received
January-February:	Main interviews (continued on demand until enrolment)
End June/early July:	Introduction to College (two days of tasters, guidance)
GCSE results:	Students contact colleges to confirm/clarify their programme choice and intention to enrol
Early September:	Enrolment and induction

The interviews (January-February) are conducted by Liaison Teams led by senior college managers. They have three intended outcomes:

- marketing research (evaluation of promotional activity; possible additions to the course offer)
- recruitment to college (students indicate whether Paston is their first or second choice)
- summary record and information document (retained by student).

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During the 'introduction to college' sessions, students are asked to complete two further forms. One confirms or updates the students' course choices made on the original application form and possibly modified at interview; the second provides an evaluation of the introduction days (see Figure 6 below).

FIGURE 6: PASTON COLLEGE EVALUATION FORM

FORM 8

INTRO PASTON

QUESTIONNAIRE

This Questionnaire divides into two parts. In (A) we would like your evaluations and any comments about particular aspects of your days at the College. In (B) you are asked to make more general comments about INTRO PASTON.

This exercise is designed to give us information which will help us to respond better to your needs; you should not be concerned that your answers will affect your application or your future in any way, as your replies are anonymous.

(A)
Look at each of the statements below and put a rating in the box against each statement using a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, and 4 = strongly disagree.

I was made to feel welcome at the beginning	
I was put at my ease by the teachers	
I was given a clear picture of what would be happening each day	
I was given information and material to help me get around easily	
Lessons and events ran to the timetable provided	
The Staff were helpful	
The Staff were friendly	
The sessions I attended provided the information I needed	
The sessions I attended helped me make my final course choices	
I have had opportunities to discuss my course choices	
I have had opportunities for individual discussions about my future	
I now know what I am aiming for next year	

Please use this space to comment further on any of your ratings if you wish.

P.T.O.

FORM 8

INTRO PASTON

QUESTIONNAIRE

(B)
Please give brief responses, if you can, to these general questions:

- What have you enjoyed most about INTRO PASTON?
- What have you found most helpful?
- What have you found least satisfactory?
- If Paston is your second choice, or you are withdrawing, please give reasons why
- Please use this space to make any other comments (about anything at all)

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your responses will help us to improve the provision for future students.

Finally, after the publication of GCSE results, students are sent a form to invite them to:

- confirm their course choices
- re-negotiate some of their course choices
- re-negotiate all of their course choices
- withdraw their application.

The college has created a database with records of the original application, any subsequent amendments and receipt of the specified forms recorded. In the case of past GCSE response, the system allows accurate monitoring of replies and identifies students to be contacted by phone to determine their intention.

The use of an MIS is critical in ensuring easy access to the data for all college managers. It also produces summary reports for a better overview and to trigger any necessary actions. The database fields are illustrated on the next page.

All the processes are closely monitored in order to:

- take remedial action if required
- ensure the students are placed correctly on courses
- evaluate the effectiveness of the component stages of the process
- evaluate the effectiveness of promotional activity.

The system developed at Paston is quite resource intensive but the college is satisfied that the investment is worthwhile. Ninety per cent of students who make Paston their first choice in January/February, enrol at the college; the response rate to Form 9 (after GCSE results) is around 90%; college courses are full with relatively little post-entry withdrawal either from the individual course or from the college; overall retention rates are around 91% for a curriculum offer dominated by two-year A-level programmes. Monitoring also allows the college to follow up students who have not returned their form (50% of whom ultimately enrol at the college). It has allowed the college to make continuous adjustments to the process (e.g. to amend occasionally off-putting messages from individual teachers about the overwhelming difficulties of courses; resolving information and recruitment difficulties at a particular feeder school following a staffing change).

FIGURE 7: PASTON COLLEGE MIS DATABASE FIELDS

Student Intake 1996 - Summary Form	
Application Procedure Details	
Interview Date: 16/2/96	Accept? <input checked="" type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N
Interviewer: NB	
Priority: <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> W <input type="radio"/> X	
Intro? <input type="radio"/> Y <input checked="" type="radio"/> N	Post-Intro Priority <input checked="" type="radio"/> 1 <input type="radio"/> 2 <input type="radio"/> W <input type="radio"/> X
Pink Form? <input type="radio"/> Y <input checked="" type="radio"/> N	
Gold Form? <input checked="" type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N	Enrol? <input checked="" type="radio"/> Y <input type="radio"/> N
One Year Courses: GCSE-LAW, RSA-CLAIT	
Two Year Courses: A-PSYCHOLOGY, A-SOCIOLOGY, A-HISTORY	
Notes: AA PHONED 9.7.96 - 1ST CHOICE CONFIRMED. CANNOT ATTEND ENROLMENT.	MAIN MENU

Course/Application History	
Current choice:	
One Year Courses	GCSE-LAW, RSA-CLAIT
Two Year Courses	A-PSYCHOLOGY, A-SOCIOLOGY, A-HISTORY
alternative:	
Original Application	A-PSYCHOLOGY, A-SOCIOLOGY, GCSE-LAW, RSA-TYPING
Post-Interview	A-PSYCHOLOGY, A-SOCIOLOGY, A-HISTORY RSA-CLAIT
Post Intro	A-PSYCHOLOGY, A-SOCIOLOGY, A-HISTORY, RSA-CLAIT

The processes would obviously be more complex in a large FE college where students are recruited from a more diverse population. Nevertheless, a number of colleges have implemented systems which track students from the first point of enquiry (P. Martinez, 1996) and the key principles of the Paston model seem to be capable of replication elsewhere.

A consideration of pre-enrolment activity at Hastings College reinforces this point. Responding to some low retention and pass rates in health and social care, the programme area developed the following mix of college and local procedures:

- *college reception areas were clearly signposted and made more welcoming*
- *all enquiries were dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible*
- *telephone enquiries were logged in the book and regularly monitored to check that the enquiry had been followed up*
- *for 16-19 year olds there was a standardised one-to-one interview to which parents were invited, followed by a group pre-course activity session during an early evening, when the students were given in-depth information about the courses available in the health and social care sector, took part in a short activity based on a video and group discussion, plus a basic skills assessment*
- *course groups were invited into college during the summer term after the GCSE examinations, to look at specific course details and to get to know their new course colleagues*
- *most mature students were interviewed late in the summer term and the interview had a different emphasis – one of guidance counselling*
- *a pre-course instructive programme for mature students was introduced.*

(V. Bannister, 1996).

INFORMATION PROVISION

In many of the colleges and other education services under review, considerable attention has been paid to the quality and content of pre-enrolment information.

Judging from parallel research, information which is generally provided includes details of course content and objectives, course work and assessment, tutorial arrangements, social facilities, assistance with finance, availability of support services, etc. Thus, at Stockport College, improvements to information giving and advice have included:

- redesign of programme leaflets
- programme handbooks
- creation of additional information points
- development of a central initial guidance and advice service
- customer service training for business support staff.

Amanda Hayes (Assistant Principal, Kensington and Chelsea) has identified a particular 'threshold fear' experienced by many adult students to explain the anxieties felt by many students before a course starts, and the frequency with which such students are accepted on courses but do not enrol, or enrol but do not turn up. From this perspective, students need a mixture of practical information, encouragement and messages to help overcome initial anxieties. Pre-course information might, therefore, include details of:

the real costs of study, time commitment outside college, information about other students (especially age profile), actual destination of previous students, the average time of travelling between sites by public transport, lift scheme.

(A. Hayes, 1996)

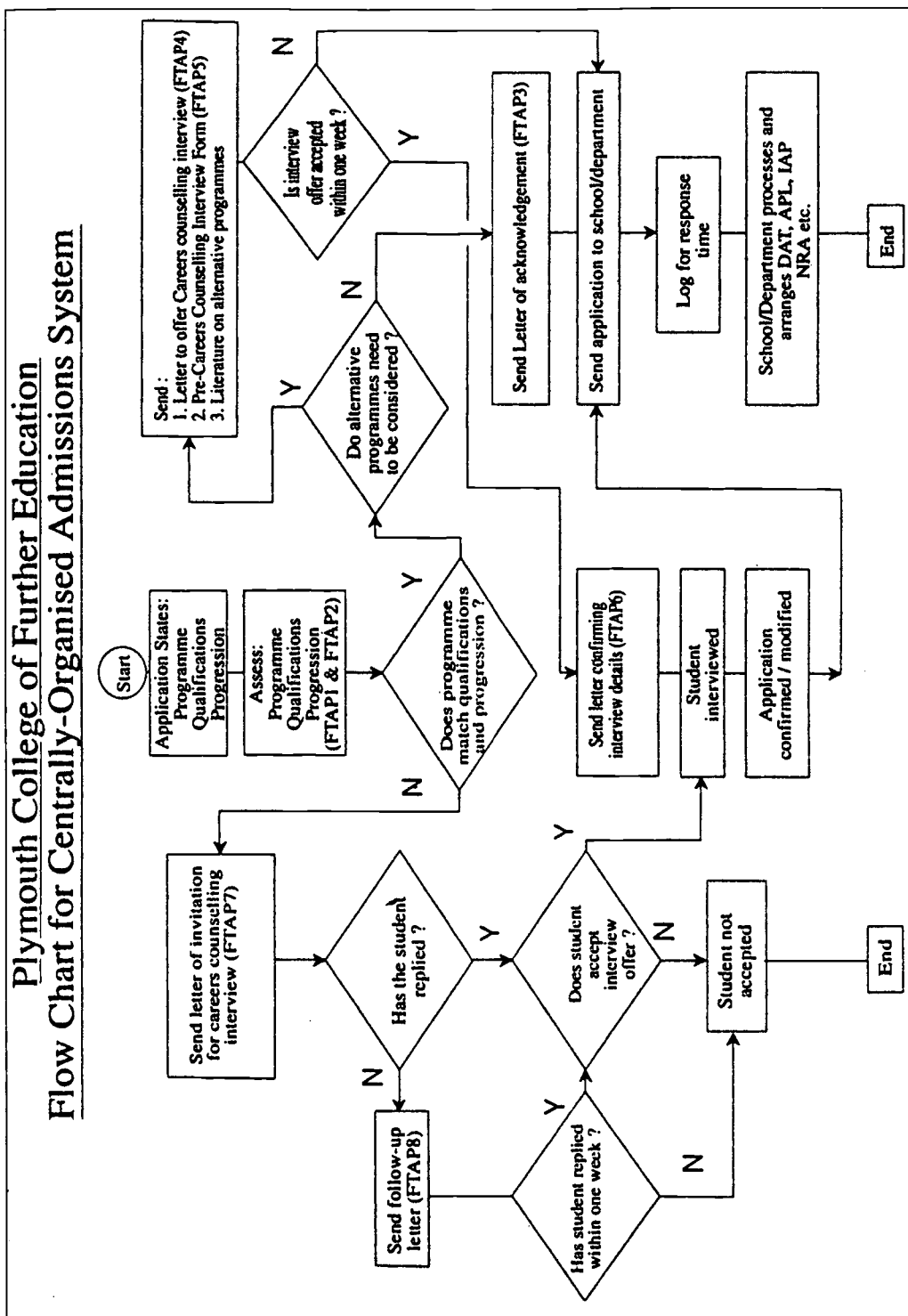
The how and when of the communication of such information will depend on the local context. A number of colleges report success from their involvement of current students in giving pre-enrolment information. Croydon Continuing Education and Training Service (CETS) has adopted the policy of devoting part of the initial session of any course to induction factors such as assessment, student readiness and expectations, course level, syllabus content, specific teaching methods, on-course costs and realistic objectives, as well as an emphasis on regular attendance (M. Vick, 1997).

Student services staff visit classes in Kensington and Chelsea College evening centres to explain what services are available, e.g. progression advice, information on DSS regulations, especially the Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA). The personal contact is far more likely to lead to further contact than an entry in the prospectus, leaflets or other written information.

ADVICE AND GUIDANCE SERVICES

There is a pronounced movement towards the establishment of centralised guidance and admissions units with dedicated staff. The reasons have been fully rehearsed elsewhere and do not need to be repeated here (see, for example, Reisenberger and Sadler, 1997). The model developed at Plymouth College is shown on the next page as a flow-chart, and similar models operate at Lambeth and elsewhere.

FIGURE 8: PLYMOUTH COLLEGE FLOW CHART



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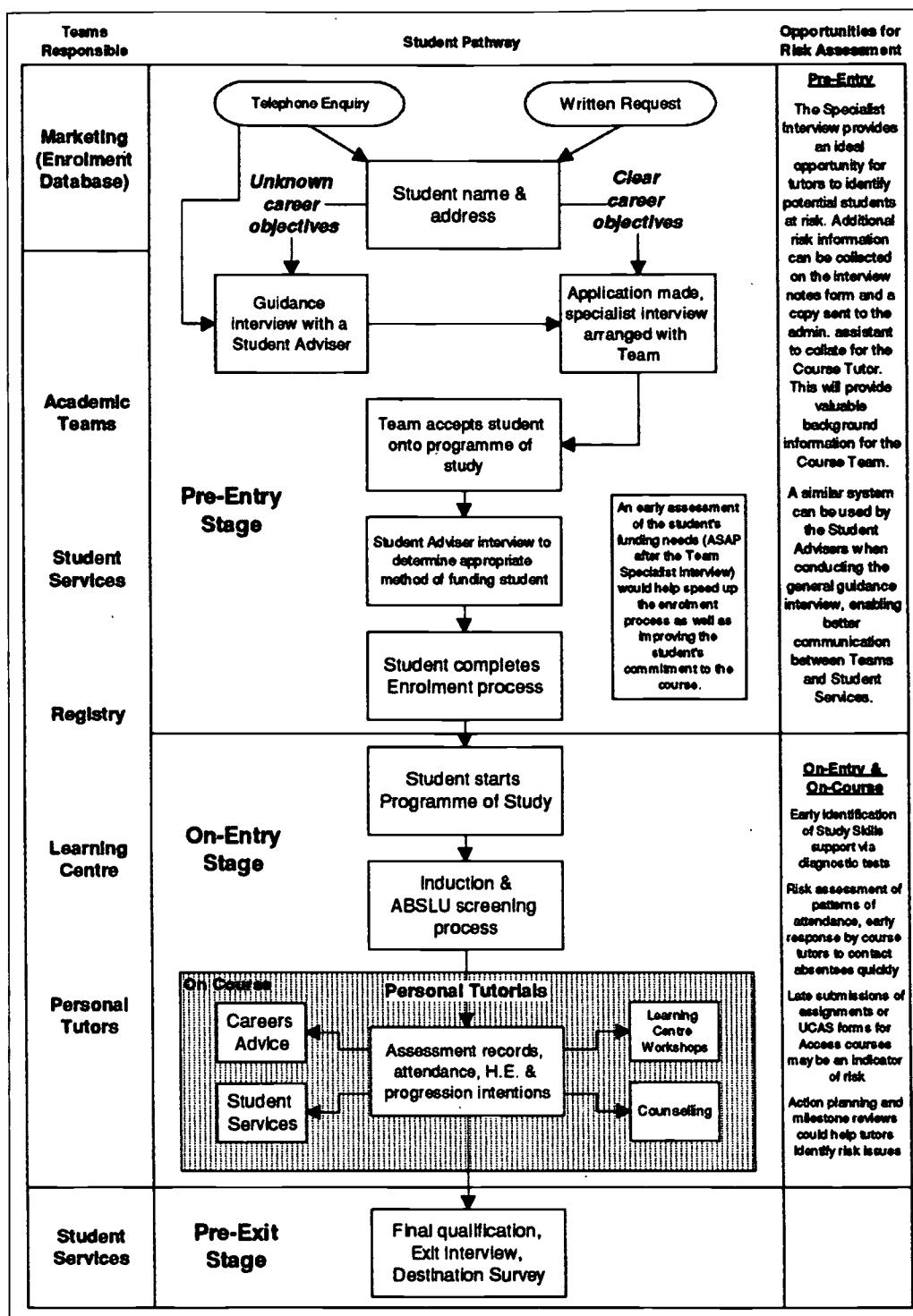
Within centralised systems, Walsall and North Lincolnshire Colleges have created dedicated adult guidance teams. The system developed at Walsall is reviewed in P. Martinez, 1996. At North Lincolnshire, the services of up to four adult guidance staff are part-funded by the local TEC which pays £30 for each adult guidance interview, irrespective of the outcome. The team is drawn from the different schools in the college and is the only service which can approve the remission of fees. In addition to identifying appropriate courses and learning support opportunities, the team has been able to liaise with Job Centre staff to:

- agree on a shared interpretation of JSA rules
- establish procedures for students to help them avoid falling foul of 'actively seeking work' tests
- negotiate times for students to attend job clubs, etc.

A different solution to a similar problem has been developed at South East Essex. Here, the guidance issues identified by the college included: variability of information, interview and guidance processes, course placement by reference to student eligibility for funding (e.g. the European Social Fund, ESF) rather than by reference to course suitability, and failure to identify students at risk of non-completion.

The system developed by the college involves collaboration between general student advisers (student services team) and teaching teams. Broadly, the student adviser is responsible for offering impartial academic and careers guidance, and financial advice and controls access to college financial support. The teaching team is responsible for course-specific guidance. Both the course team and the adviser are responsible for evaluating whether students may be 'at risk'. This process is represented on the next page.

FIGURE 9: SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE INFORMATION AND FLOW DIAGRAM – STUDENT PRE-ENTRY TO EXIT 1995-6



(South East Essex College, 1996)

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The college has addressed the issues of impartiality and standardisation through role clarification, the establishment of clear procedures and operating standards and staff development.

MONITORING AND EVALUATING PRE-ENROLMENT SERVICES

The procedures adopted at Paston Sixth-Form College to support and monitor the student decision-making process through to enrolment are reviewed above. A different approach is being developed at High Peak College to investigate the apparently high levels of drop-out between application and enrolment (J. McHugh, 1996). The methodology was quite simple:

- production of MIS reports indicating not only the 'conversion rate' by programme area and level, from application to interview and interview to enrolment, but also transfers into and out of courses
- a telephone survey of students who did not enrol, to identify their reason; in the pilot study, respondents were offered only a small number of possible reasons: choice of another school, choice of another college, employment, travel or other.

The outcomes were interesting. First and perhaps foremost, the response rate was high. Secondly, MIS data revealed that the volume of withdrawals was rather greater than anticipated: 36% of the total applicants (1996-7) did not enrol. If continuing students are stripped out of the total applicants, the withdrawal rate increases to some 43%. Thirdly, the same data suggested differential patterns of withdrawal by course either before or after interview. Fourthly, an analysis of MIS and survey data suggested different reasons for withdrawal between applicants for level 2 and level 3 courses and between courses at the same level. Finally, there were quite different patterns of transfer into and out of courses that would have been hidden by crude comparisons of applications and enrolments.

This research is at a preliminary stage but suggests quite strongly that the monitoring of pre-enrolment drop-out (or 'non-conversion'), can provide useful information to support the review and refinement of promotional and interview arrangements and can provide a platform for the review of a college's competitive position vis à vis other providers.

PRE-ENROLMENT SERVICES: SOME CONCLUSIONS

- Clarifying entry criteria can contribute to successful retention strategies, even if the immediate effect may be to reduce student enrolments.
- Investment in pre-enrolment systems, as at Paston College, provides potential benefits in terms of curriculum planning, more effective placement of students on courses, and marketing research information.
- Colleges have generally found it helpful to redesign programme and course information materials from the point of view of their intended students.
- Within a general trend towards centralised admission and guidance units, several colleges have found that they need to develop specialist adult guidance services.
- The benefits from tracking student progress from initial point of contact through to course commencement, careful evaluation of events on the way; and managerial attention to improvement; more than repay the cost of such activity.

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5. Initial student assessment

At the risk of over simplification, retention issues are being addressed by student assessment processes in three main ways:

- screening and diagnostic mechanisms to identify student learning support and/or key skills requirements
- early on-course assessment to check that students are enrolled on appropriate courses and to identify particular learning needs
- early identification of 'at-risk' students.

SCREENING AND DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT FOR BASIC AND KEY SKILLS

Most FE colleges in England now screen some or all of their full-time students to identify basic skills support needs and most of the colleges screen all their full-time students (BSA, 1996). General issues around the purpose and validity of diagnostic screening will shortly be reviewed in some detail in another FEDA publication. The most commonly used screening instruments are probably those developed by the Basic Skills Agency (formerly ALBSU). There is, however, dissatisfaction in some colleges with these. Gateshead and Newcastle Colleges, for example, are developing their own instruments. At Newcastle, methods to diagnose key skills needs are distinguished from those identifying module-specific skills (M. Hughes, 1996). City and Islington College has identified significant improvements in learning outcomes following the diagnosis of students' learning styles and strategies and the use of the diagnosis to:

- build on particular strengths of given learning styles
- develop teacher awareness of learning styles and change teaching strategies
- work with individual students who are applying inappropriate learning strategies to given learning tasks (R. Cooper, 1996).

North Lincolnshire and Bexley Colleges have taken a different route by buying in commercially available packages. North Lincolnshire uses a screening system developed by the British Psychological Society: Assessment for Training and Employment (ATE). This is a psychometric test with a vocational orientation. The test is designed to be machine read and, within 24 hours, feedback is made available to teachers. Data is also supplied to MIS to identify students who may be eligible for additional support units, within the English funding methodology.

Bexley College has also bought a machine readable Foundation Skills Assessment developed by The Psychological Corporation. This tests for vocabulary, reading comprehension, number operation and problem solving. The College has identified a number of benefits from the use of this instrument:

- better initial interviewing and course placement
- opportunity to plan develop discrete provision
- identification of learning support needs.

The Bexley experience is discussed below in the case study.

CASE STUDY: INITIAL TESTING (BEXLEY COLLEGE)

The college is a medium (7,500 enrolments) FE college in South East London. Initial testing has been introduced for all applicants to full-time courses, with a second phase of testing during induction. Feedback is generated within a week.

The rationale for this testing is to inform the interviewing tutor of the likelihood of the student being ready for the proposed course. The college felt that many potential students were lost where provisional offers could not be taken up. Rather than disappoint applicants at interview, it was felt that reasonable course counselling would be possible if some indication of the level of a student's basic skills could be determined before formal results. The initial testing does not screen out students; it is an effective vehicle for realistic advice and positive feedback to them about course requirements. The Business School has increased its course offering for the 1996-7 academic year to include all three GNVQ levels and found the initial test scores an invaluable aid when offering places.

Discrete provision was planned for a group of motor vehicle students whose scores indicated that they would have difficulty in dealing with the requirements of a full NVQ. Without such mechanisms, these students would have been overwhelmed by course requirements which were standard for the qualification they were attempting.

The third aspect of this initiative is to conduct diagnostic tests for language and number skills for all newly enrolled full-time students. The diagnostic testing of students on entry has now been in place for two years and the experience of 1994-5 when students were only initially tested followed by 1995-6 which saw full testing in place with template scoring, encouraged the team to opt for full assessment reporting to streamline the identification of students requiring support.

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Having started to use a commercial test programme where norms for different student populations are available as benchmarks, the college availed itself of the full services of the company and now uses machine scoring and reporting for every individual student. This allows the team to identify students with additional support needs and to assess the areas where they most can benefit. In the first year of using the full test, scoring was done through templates; this enabled a result to be matched to norms but was inadequate in targeting areas of weakness. The profile which is now generated allows a learner programme to be drawn up in consultation with the student and a specific set of skill areas to be addressed in subsequent support sessions. Implementation of learner plans is now much improved.

ADDITIONAL LEARNING SUPPORT

After a pilot programme four years ago when 65 students were offered additional learning support, a college-wide initiative was adopted to identify students who could benefit from extra sessions in language and number skills outside their normal course provision. Timetabling was geared around window slots reserved for course groupings and a team of language and number specialists was developed through appointments of full-time staff and recruitment of sessional staff, experienced in working with both the core skills of literacy and numeracy and reluctant learners.

The major thrust of the support was to make the input and materials relevant to the students. Vocationally related resources were developed to augment any assignment work that students brought to the workshops. Tutors were encouraged to send copies of assignments and course-work requirements to the support staff to enable them to generate related learning plans and associated materials.

Only full-time students were catered for in timetable window slots but provision was made for part-timers to have the same facilities through open access slots when the support staff were scheduled. These have variable attendance and tend to be more popular at certain times of the year. A system of voluntary referral was implemented to accommodate students who sought additional help of their own volition, tutor referral for any part-time students who were felt to be in need of support and specialist help for any students who had more particular needs, such as dyslexia.

OUTCOMES

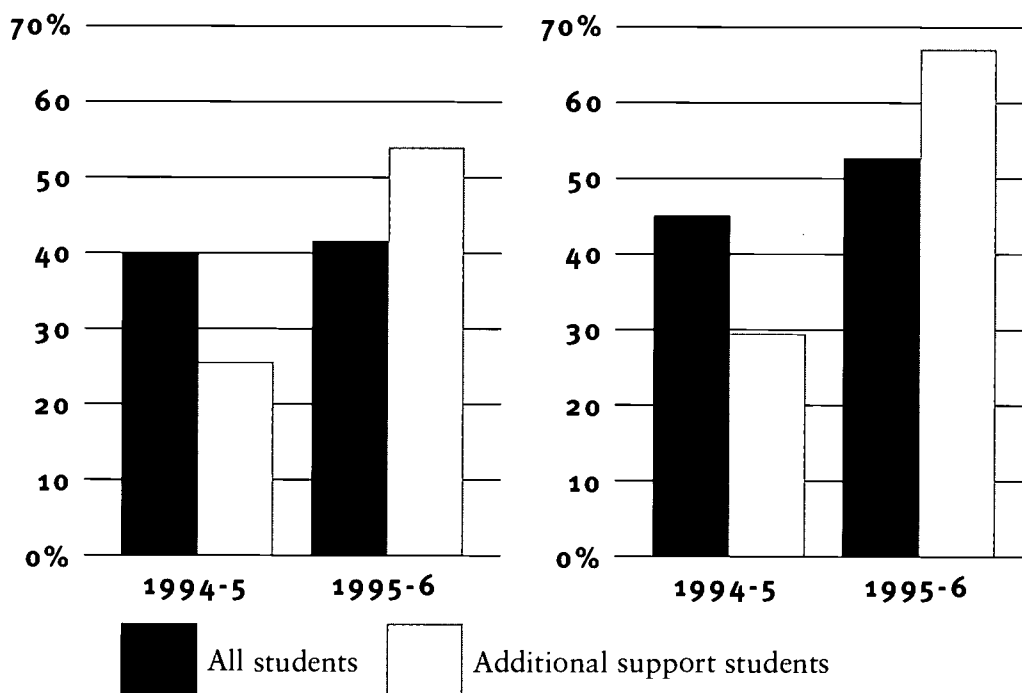
Qualitative outcomes are that students, teachers and careers staff are confident of the validity and utility of the assessment. Indeed, a number of part-time students have expressed an interest in being assessed.

Quantitative outcomes include a significant increase in the number of students with identified additional support requirements to 8% of full-time college students.

Despite the increase in their number, students with additional support requirements have shown encouraging improvements in completion rates (around 10%) and achievement rates (shown in the table and bar charts)

FIGURE 10: ACHIEVEMENT RATES IN BEXLEY COLLEGE IN NUMBERS AND BAR CHARTS

	%Achievements/ Enrolments		%Achievements/ Completion	
Academic year	1994-5	1995-6	1994-5	1995-6
All students	40.04%	41.62%	45.09%	52.65%
Additional support students	28.58%	54.00%	29.49%	67.08%



ADDITIONAL AND ON-COURSE ASSESSMENT

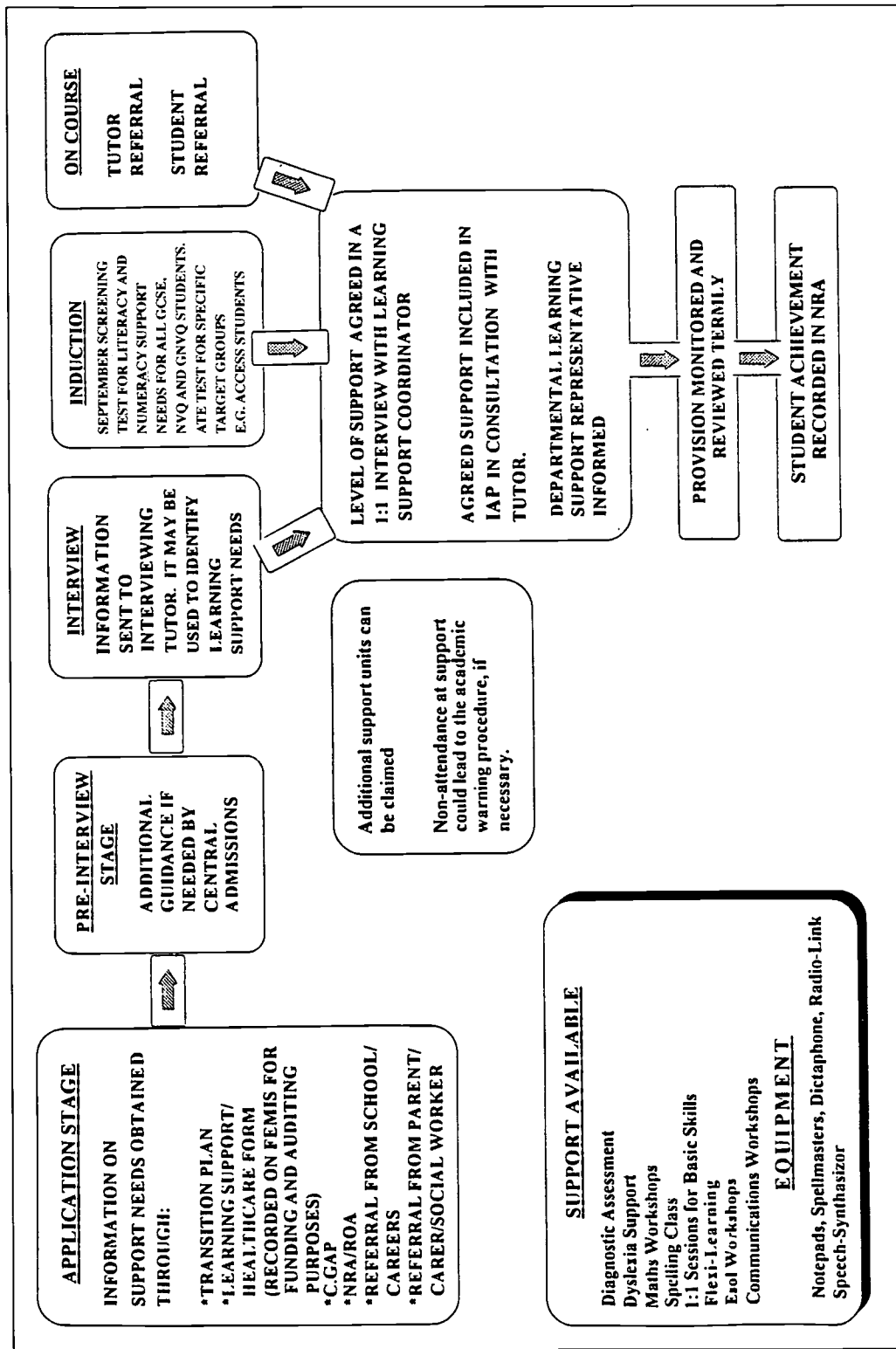
Initial screening for basic or key skills is being supplemented in some colleges by additional assessment to explore particular issues. This sort of assessment usually seems to be driven by the experience of teaching teams and is intended to test student aptitudes, skills or understanding for particular programmes of study.

At Newcastle College, action research has been undertaken to test Access students for basic and module-specific skills to verify the assumption that students were dropping out or failing because of deficiencies in these skills (M. Hughes, 1996).

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Plymouth College of FE uses the BSA (ALBSU) basic skills screening test during induction for all full-time GCSE, NVQ and GNVQ students. In addition, the college uses the Assessment for Training and Employment test (ATE) for target student groups, e.g. Access students. The testing procedure is set out below in the context of the other learning support systems.

FIGURE 11: PLYMOUTH COLLEGE LEARNING SUPPORT



At Kensington and Chelsea College, temporary registers are used for the first ten weeks of all courses to allow for a diagnostic period for student and lecturer and for a transfer to a more appropriate programme if necessary.

As well as this general approach to screening, reviews by course teams have identified the need to assess particular aspects of student capability, attitudes or both, either because students' expectations of their course are inaccurate or because of particular learning needs in respect of specific courses. Thus, specific post-entry testing is being piloted in the following areas:

FIGURE 12: POST-ENTRY TESTING FOR LEARNING NEEDS IN KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA COLLEGE

Course	Issue
NVQ2, Carpentry and Joinery	Practical skill levels
CGLI Electronic Servicing	Reasoning skills
GNVQ Intermediate Built Environment	Student attitude and commitment
Access to Higher Education (Humanities) and Foundation Certificate in Engineering (SLDD)	Group cohesion

Several issues were identified in other Plymouth courses, where despite detailed interviewing and information processes, students still seem to misunderstand the nature of the programme in terms of content or the type of work undertaken. Representative mini-assignments/tasks are now being set for prospective students as part of the interview or other pre-enrolment processes.

INITIAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT: SOME CONCLUSIONS

- A consensus has emerged that initial screening process can play an important role in college retention strategies.
- There is much less agreement around the most appropriate instruments to use and colleges are divided between self-developed instruments, those developed by the basic skills agency BSA (ALBSU) and those being provided commercially.
- Some colleges have found that screening can also assist in curriculum planning, in the improvement of the processes for placing students on courses and in the development and enrichment of student learning plans.

- Module- or programme-specific assessments supplement basic or key skills assessments in some colleges. They are designed to test, for example:
 - understanding of course requirements
 - student motivation
 - student reasoning skills
 - the ability of students to work in groups.
- Above all, the case study experience suggests very strongly that it is not so much the initial screening on its own which affects retention but rather effective teaching interventions and changes to curriculum structures and processes triggered by the outcomes of such assessments.

6. At-risk students

Can we establish reliable and robust procedures to identify students at risk of dropping-out? The answer would appear to be a heavily qualified 'yes'.

In marked contrast to North American community colleges, in British colleges being at risk of dropping-out, is closely associated with observed behaviours rather than demographic characteristics.

On the other hand, some evidence is now emerging from the analysis of the 1994/95 English student record data (ISR) which suggests a demographic dimension to being 'at risk'.

ANALYSIS AT NATIONAL LEVEL (ENGLAND)

The FEFC has published tables of overall retention rates for full and part time students and overall achievement rates for each college in England (FEFC, 1997a).

This analysis is somewhat tentative and a number of cautionary statements are required:

- The data may not be entirely accurate; MIS data from which the ISR is extracted was queried by inspectors in many colleges.
- Completion rates are calculated by reference to enrolments at the first census date (1 November).
- In the absence of data from the previous year, completion rates for two-year courses are calculated by reference to enrolment at the first census date of the current year (rather than the year of commencement of the course).

The FEFC Statistical Section has done some further unpublished analysis (FEFC, 1997d) of differential completion rates. The following discussion draws heavily on this analysis.

The FEFC statistical section has specifically explored withdrawal issues by level of qualification, age, gender, ethnicity, fee-paying status and entitlement to additional support units. Some further qualifications need to be added to those expressed above in relation to this second data set:

- The data set only includes ISR returns from only 373 colleges; it does not include any returns from 'external' institutions (e.g. adult education services).
- The data relates to students on all types of provision at further education colleges, not just that funded by the FEFC.

- Unlike the data set published in *Measuring Achievement* (FEFC 1997a), this data set is not restricted to year-long courses and includes all courses of more than 12 weeks duration.

Having stated these qualifications, the data set is very large – comprising over 1.64 million student records, and a number of conclusions can be drawn:

- Male full- and part-time students are slightly more likely than female students to withdraw.
- Male and female full-time students aged 25 and over are less likely to withdraw than students in other age bands.
- Male and female full-time students aged 17 to 19 are slightly less likely to withdraw than students aged 16 or students over 19.

This data is derived from the following table:

FIGURE 13: ANALYSIS OF RETENTION RATES EXCLUDING 12-WEEK COURSES: NATIONAL LEVEL 1994-5

Full-time students 1994-95						
Age	Male Completion status			Female Completion status		
	continuing /completed	withdrawn	%	continuing /completed	withdrawn	%
Under 16	1,359	278	17%	1,083	172	14%
16	67,409	9,637	13%	69,407	8,815	11%
17	57,690	6,815	11%	61,171	5,713	9%
18	32,161	4,086	11%	30,299	3,205	10%
16-18	157,260	20,538	12%	160,877	17,733	10%
19	15,366	1,999	12%	12,825	1,385	10%
20-24	28,531	4,490	14%	24,765	3,400	12%
25+	40,399	6,124	13%	48,582	6,215	11%
19+	84,296	12,613	13%	86,172	11,000	11%
Total	242,915	33,429	12%	248,132	28,905	10%

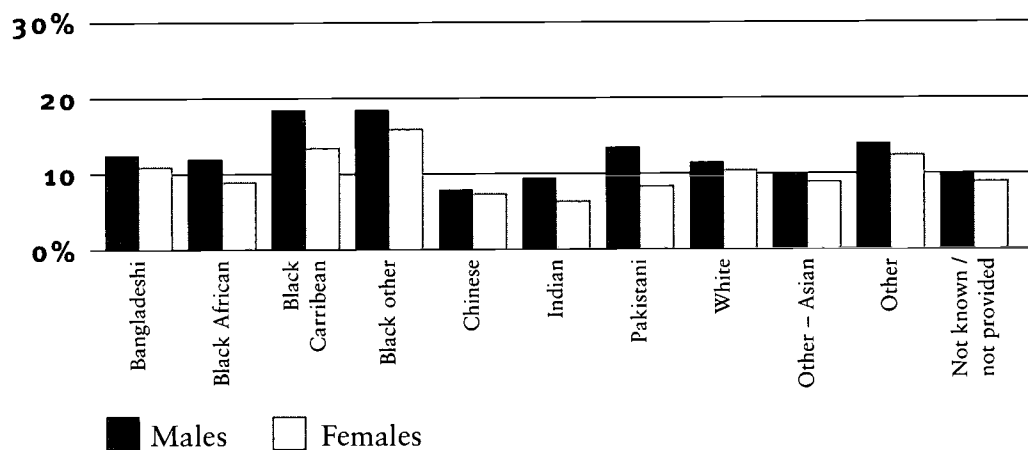
Part-time students 1994-95						
Age	Male Completion status			Female Completion status		
	continuing /completed	withdrawn	%	continuing /completed	withdrawn	%
Under 16	10,120	718	7%	10,390	919	8%
16	19,696	3,328	14%	16,030	3,123	16%
17	24,698	3,527	12%	18,645	3,044	14%
18	25,189	3,125	11%	18,736	3,088	14%
16-18	69,583	9,980	13%	53,411	9,255	15%
19	19,987	2,552	11%	16,473	2,522	13%
20-24	67,865	9,708	13%	85,534	12,008	12%
25+	263,091	27,789	10%	404,876	41,354	9%
19+	350,943	40,049	10%	506,883	55,884	10%
Total	430,646	50,747	11%	570,684	66,058	10%

The picture in respect of student ethnicity, the financial circumstances of students and the application of fewer admission policies requires some more detailed discussion.

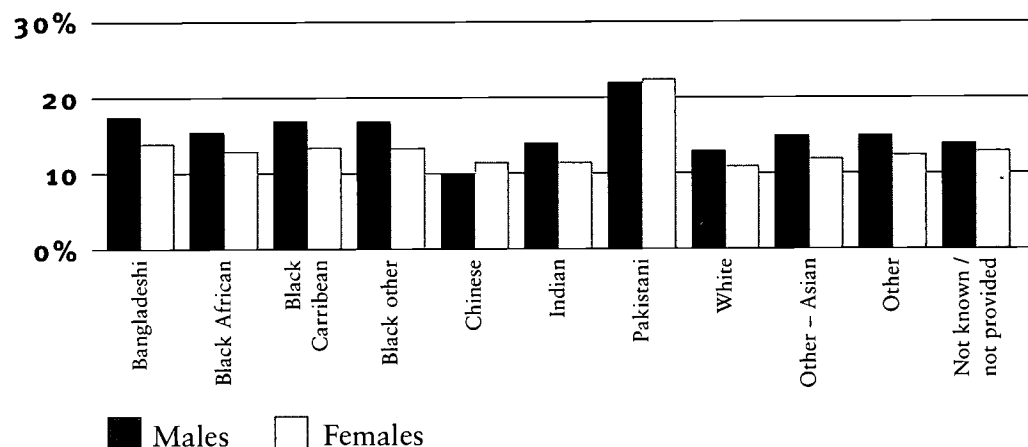
The accompanying bar charts show withdrawal rates for full- and part-time students by age group and ethnicity. They suggest that:

- Black Caribbean and other black 16-18-year-olds have relatively high withdrawal rates and that this is more significant for male students.
- Overall, students from Chinese and Indian communities have the lowest withdrawal rates.
- Full-time students aged 19 and above from Pakistani communities have relatively high withdrawal rates of 21% for males and 22% for females.

**FIGURE 14: ANALYSIS OF RETENTION RATES BY AGE GROUP:
NATIONAL LEVEL 1994-5
16-18 YEAR OLD FULL-TIME STUDENTS**

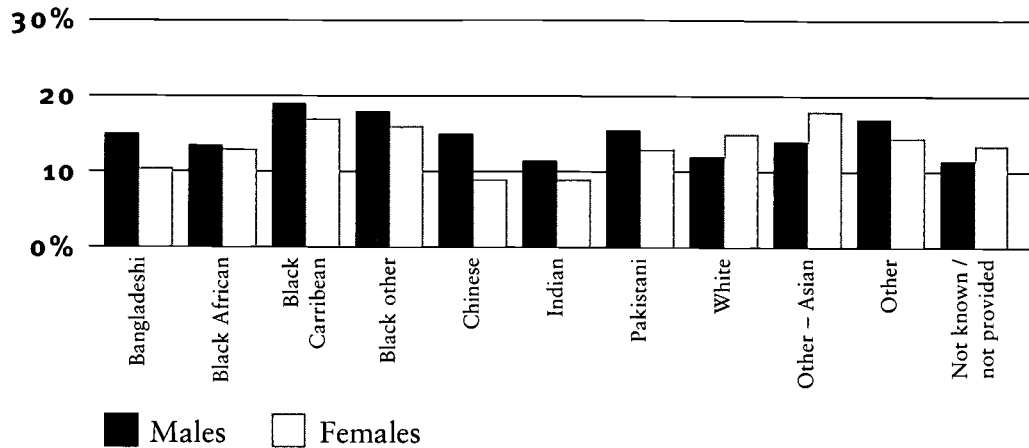


ADULT FULL-TIME STUDENTS

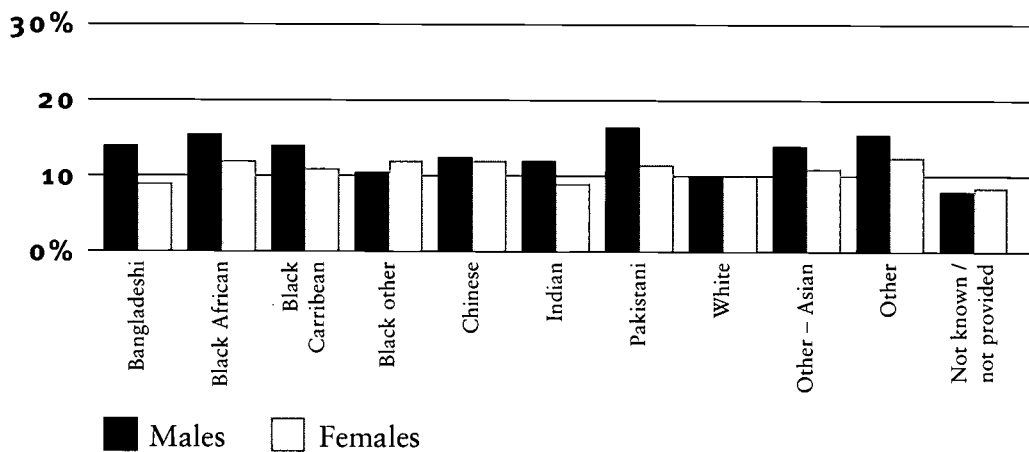


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**FIGURE 15: ANALYSIS OF RETENTION RATES BY STUDENT ETHNICITY:
NATIONAL LEVEL 1994-5
16-18 YEAR OLD PART-TIME STUDENTS**



ADULT PART-TIME STUDENTS



In 1994-5, 6.3% of full-time FEFC-funded students received additional support; 1.4% of part-time students were entitled to such support.

Analysis of the ISR suggests that overall:

- Completion rates for students receiving additional support are higher than for those students not receiving such support.
- The difference was particularly pronounced for full-time students aged 19 and above.

Issues around student financial status and fee admission policies are particularly complex.

A common view among teachers and managers is that students who pay no, or a reduced, fee have less investment in and hence commitment to their learning programmes.

The statistical section of the FEFC has analysed withdrawal rates by fee-paying status, concentrating on students aged 19 and above. Among this age group, the analysis suggests quite strongly that:

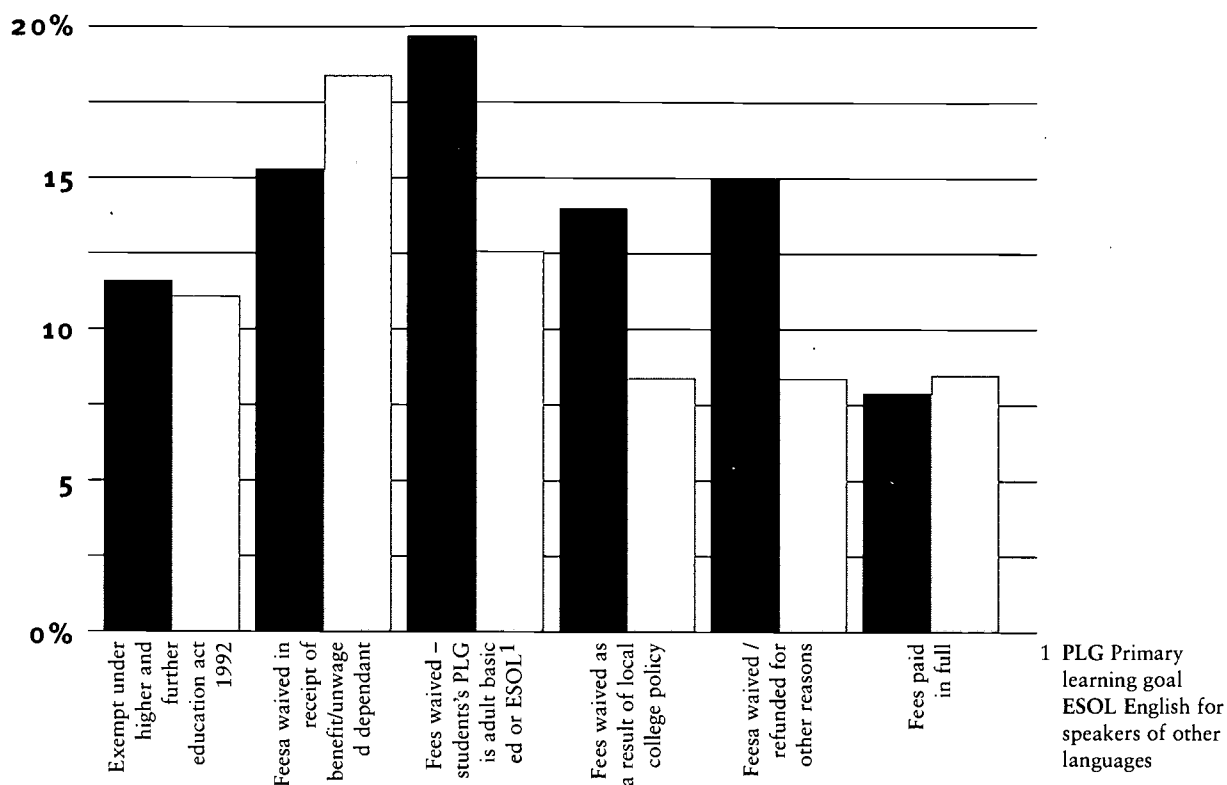
- Students who pay fees in full, whether part- or full-time, are relatively likely to complete their courses.
- Part-time students whose fees are waived as a result of local college policies or for some other reason are as likely to complete their courses as part-time students who pay full fees.
- Poor students (taking entitlement to certain state benefits as a proxy), and in particular part-time students, are relatively likely to withdraw.
- Full-time students whose fees are waived because their primary learning goal is adult basic education (ABE) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) are particularly likely to withdraw early.
- Poor full-time students (taking entitlement to state benefits as a proxy) have similar withdrawal rates to students whose fees are waived as a result of local policies or for other reasons.

This data is set out in the bar chart on the next page.

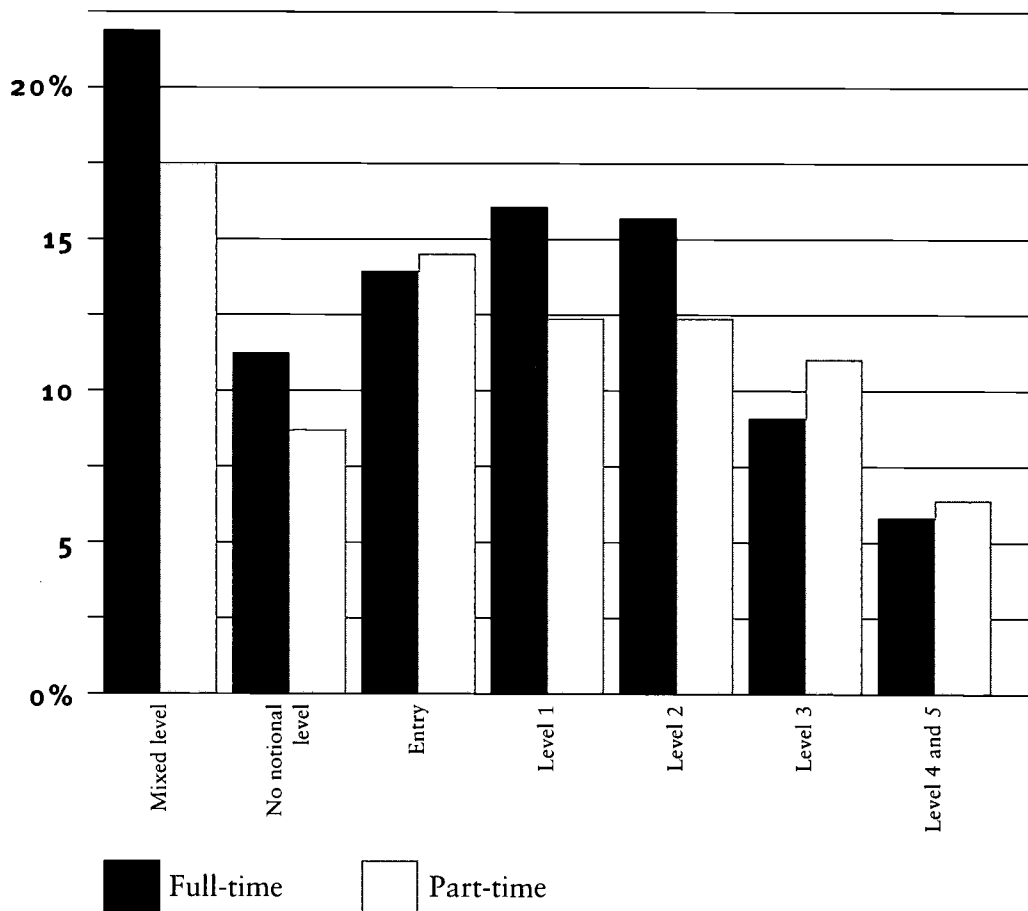
There is a strong suggestion, finally, that retention rates vary inversely with level of programme studied. In other words, withdrawal rates for programmes at entry, level 1 and level 2 are higher than programmes at level 3. This differential is even more pronounced if withdrawal from lower level programmes is compared to withdrawal from programmes at levels 4 and 5.

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FIGURE 16: ANALYSIS OF RETENTION RATES BY REASON FOR PARTIAL OR FULL NON-PAYMENT OF FEES: NATIONAL LEVEL ADULTS (19+) 1994-5



ANALYSIS OF RETENTION RATES BY LEVEL OF PROGRAMME STUDIED 1994-5



ANALYSIS AT LOCAL COLLEGE LEVEL

A number of colleges have identified behavioural characteristics of students who subsequently drop out. Tameside provides an illustrative example. Five major criteria have been established:

- late enrolment
- poor attendance
- late submission of course work
- low attainment
- students on the wrong course.

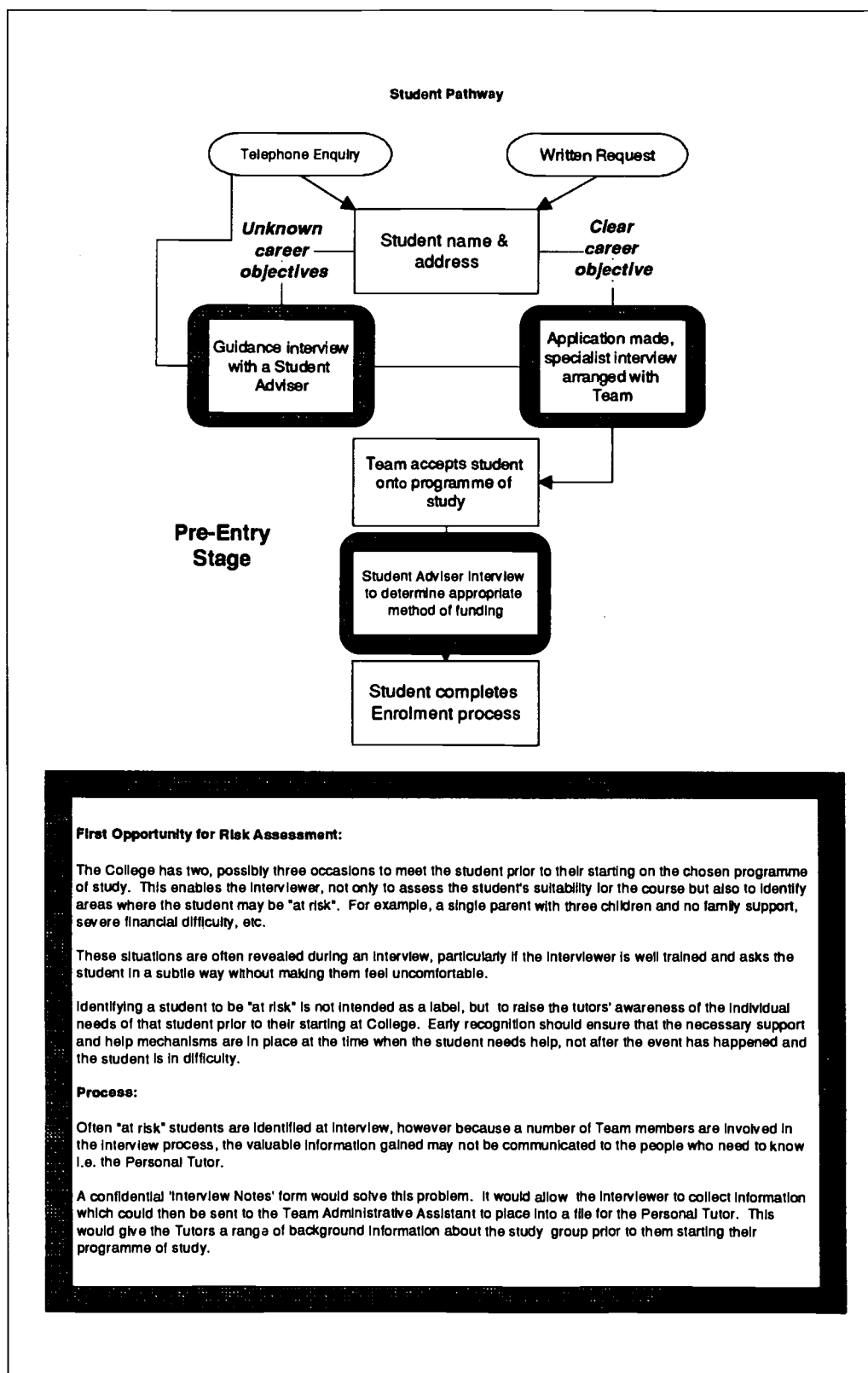
In common with many other colleges Tameside has alerted teachers, tutors and guidance services to this issue. Tutors pay particular attention to 'at-risk' students and encourage their attendance at additional workshops. They monitor progress to ensure that support mechanisms are working effectively.

Totton College has developed a slightly longer list appropriate to its student cohort (mainly full-time young students at advanced level). Additional 'at risk' factors include students:

- with significant health problems
- following courses where they are in a small minority, by gender
- who may have particular personal difficulties (parental separation or death, accommodation problems, substantial part-time work)
- who have been unable to join their first choice courses.

At-risk criteria for adult full-time students at South East Essex College are different again. Reflecting a different student population (adult, full-time), these comprise a mixture of demographic, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics. Responsibility for at-risk assessment is shared by general student advisers (student services team) and teaching teams and is discharged at both pre-enrolment and on-programme phases. This is illustrated in the following diagrams.

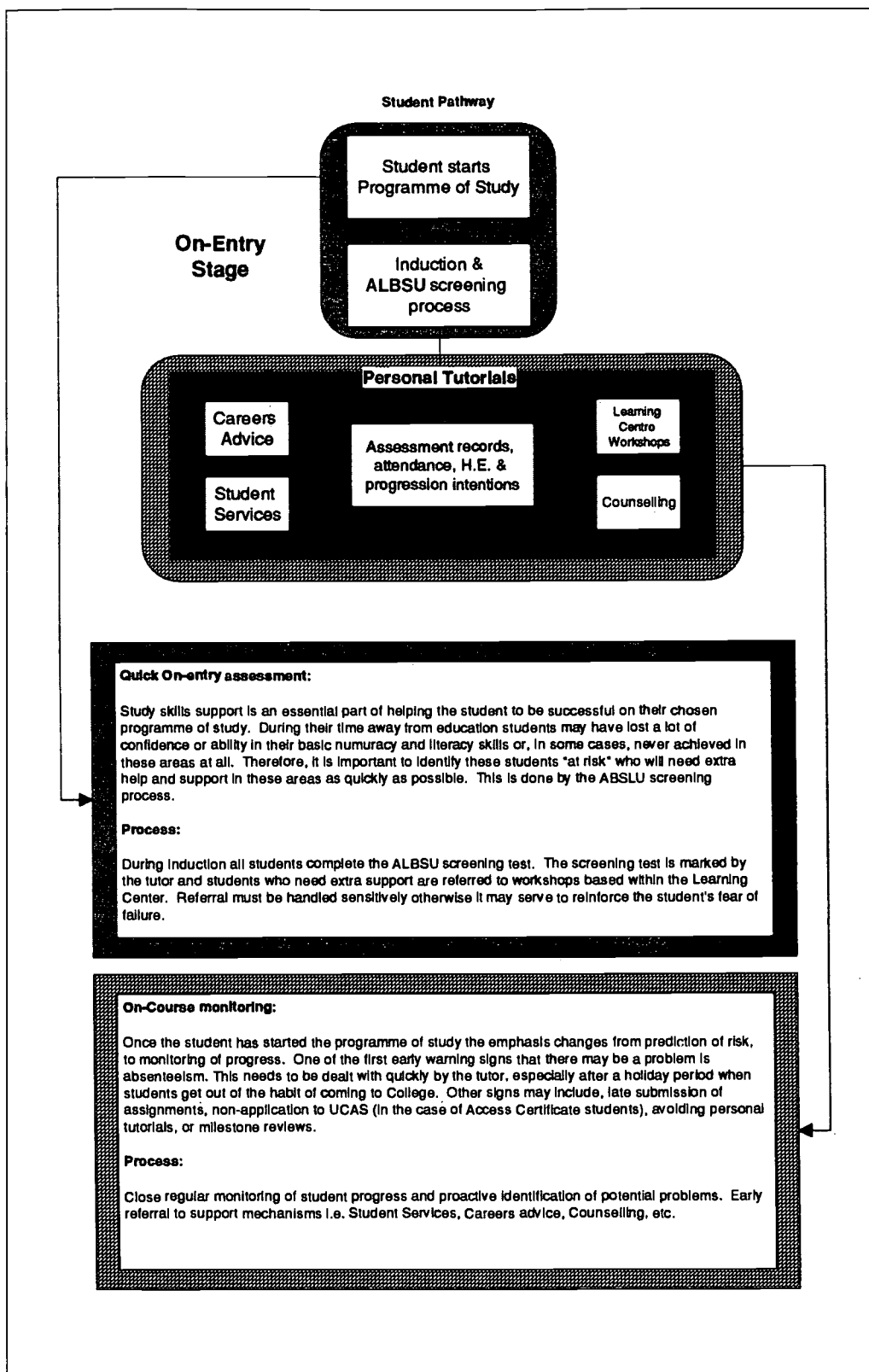
**FIGURE 17: SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE: 'AT-RISK' ASSESSMENT
PRE-ENROLMENT**



(South East Essex College, 1996 pp 52-53)

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FIGURE 18: SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE: 'AT-RISK' ASSESSMENT ON-PROGRAMME



(South East Essex College, 1996 pp52-53)

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Criteria for the assessment are set out below for different phases of the student journey.

FIGURE 19: AT-RISK CRITERIA IDENTIFIED FOR FULL-TIME ADULT STUDENTS AT SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE

PRE-ENTRY:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a lot of dependants (normally children, but could be aged relatives) • severe financial pressures • defensive about ability/experience • severe lack of confidence • low level of commitment.
AT-ENTRY:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requires additional support • late enrolment.
ON-COURSE:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attendance patterns • punctuality • late submission of assignment • UCAS application not completed (particularly good indicator for Access courses) • avoidance of action planning, milestone reviews, etc.

A quantitative approach to assessing at-risk students has been developed over two years by Paston Sixth-Form College. Discussions with teachers and tutors suggested that students most likely to drop out included those who did not appear to make friends, who found their courses too demanding, experienced difficulty in meeting assignment deadlines or in organising their study time. Analysis of MIS data revealed the following demographic factors associated with these symptoms:

- students whose families had recently moved to the area and who did not therefore form part of established friendship networks
- students who were returning to education after a break and who had lost or had not developed habits of study.

The college response has been to pay much more attention to the placement of such students in tutor groups, to start fostering group and team work approaches during induction, to support the acquisition of time management skills and to monitor closely the progress of such students.

Plymouth has developed a different quantitative approach. The college uses student perception of course (SPOC) questionnaires to identify at-risk course groups. Working with FEDA, it redesigned its SPOC questionnaires so that they could be machine read. FEDA staff conduct the analysis. Previous FEDA research has identified strong relationships between the willingness of students to recommend their college to friends and their completion status. The same research has identified a reasonably good predictive relationship between student evaluations of aspects of college which they rate as most important, and student completion status. Withdrawn students are significantly more likely to evaluate these crucial aspects of college at 3.5, 3.0 or less on a 5-point scale.

The analysis of SPOCs at Plymouth is, therefore, used to identify correlations between the evaluations of student induction ('help to settle into courses'), and the willingness of students to recommend the college to friends. Similarly, the college has been able to identify, by exception, programme areas where the overall satisfaction rating is less than 3.5 or which attract a number of ratings of individual aspects of the programme at 3.0 or less. The outcomes of this research are fed back to programme areas for consideration and action within the college's general quality review processes.

Longitudinal studies have been used in two projects to improve student retention. During 1995-6, Knowsley College asked tutors to identify full time students at risk of dropping out. The criteria, derived from research elsewhere and local experience, included motivation, social support, time pressures, financial circumstances, minimum satisfaction of entry requirements and 'other' (e.g. health, travel difficulties and domestic circumstances) (Martinez, 1996 , p16).

The outcomes were collated by the project manager but no specific interventions were prescribed. In the event, the college has decided not to continue this aspect of its strategy for two main reasons. The validity of the assessment was less reliable than had been hoped: only some 60% of students identified as at risk actually dropped-out. There was some apprehension, moreover, that the exercise might have generated self-fulfilling predictions.

On behalf of the North Yorkshire Consortium, Selby College avoided a possible problem of labelling by using a retrospective analysis. On behalf of the North Yorkshire Consortium 19 risk factors were identified (H. Kenwright, 1996).

FIGURE 20: AT-RISK FACTORS (SELBY COLLEGE)

- no central admissions interview
- applied for job/Youth Training (YT) as first choice
- reference identifies risks
- home problems
- late enrolment (last minute idea)
- on wrong level of course (academically) e.g. Fresh Start without C/Ds, Art and Design with no qualifications, etc.
- financial problems (adults)
- change courses without taking advice
- indecisive/confused at interview
- wants specific A-levels not available with GNVQ
- enrolled for A-levels when wasn't an A-level candidate
- advanced Science likely to be offered a job after work experience
- students studying under benefit rules (16 hours)
- have worked in a number of occupations in the past and no realistic career plan
- already started courses/dropped out before
- live in particular localities
- change from A levels to alternative (without counselling)
- BTEC Intermediate/First students progress to Advanced GNVQ courses (when initial GCSEs low)

A cohort of 373 full time students were scored against these risk factors, 1 point for each factor. Over three quarters (76%) of students with a risk factor of 2 or more withdrew early. Students with 1 risk factor were almost twice as likely to withdraw as students with no risk factor (15% versus 8.8%).

AT-RISK STUDENTS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

Nine tentative conclusions can be drawn from this discussion.

- There is some demographic evidence for England, based on the ISR data for 1994-5, that certain groups of students may be at risk of dropping out. Specifically, students on lower level programmes, students whose fees are waived because they are receiving certain state benefits or because their primary learning goal is ABE or ESOL, and students from particular ethnic groups, may be more likely to drop out.
- A substantial qualification to the above is that variations in completion rates between and within colleges with apparently similar student populations suggest quite strongly that 'demography is not destiny'!
- The analysis of data at national and college level suggests strongly that it is worth analysing MIS data to look for demographic patterns of student withdrawal in order to identify at risk criteria.
- In large colleges with diverse student populations, such analysis will almost certainly need to be conducted in relation to appropriate sub-sets of the student population.
- Experience at Tameside, Totton and South East Essex Colleges suggests that it is useful to establish local criteria (demographic, behavioural or attitudinal) and to help teachers, tutors and student services staff both to identify at risk students and develop appropriate responses.
- Again, the same experience suggests that in colleges with heterogeneous student populations, such criteria will need to be established in relation to relevant and discrete student groups.
- The work by Plymouth and FEDA suggests that colleges can make more intensive use of SPOC data for both formative and summative course review and improvement processes.
- Conventional approaches to longitudinal research of 'at riskness' are probably impossible in a college setting. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how a control group of at-risk students could be established where no aid, support or intervention is applied.
- On the other hand, the work at Selby suggests that it is useful to validate perceptions of at-risk factors through a retrospective analysis and to use subsequent student assessment to underpin support and intervention strategies.

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7. Induction and student motivation

In most colleges, a substantial amount of early withdrawal occurs during the first term or immediately after Christmas. This seems to be associated with difficulties in making the transition from school, disappointed expectations, social problems within courses, inappropriate course choice and, in some inner city colleges in particular, with problems of self-belief, confidence and motivation amongst students. While all agree that induction can offer help to settle in, there is much lower degree of consensus about what form induction should take. Largely anecdotal evidence from participants at conferences suggests that the form of induction is strongly contested. At one extreme, is the view that syllabus pressures and student boredom require a short, sharp, induction period. At the other, lies a preference for an extended induction sometimes linked to continuing student assessment, which can last for several days and even weeks.

A new consensus appears to be emerging, however, that induction is a complex process which necessarily extends over several weeks but where specific induction activities are integrated as quickly as possible with teaching. The activities which comprise this process are defined differently according to local college contexts and student needs, but can be summarised as:

- group forming and team work
- early success in learning
- provision for late entrants
- raising student expectations.

GROUP FORMING AND TEAMWORK

Group formation and teamwork skills have been emphasised at a number of colleges, notably Paston, Hastings and Stockport. Some particularly interesting development work has been done with part-time adult students, in addition, driven by the needs of quite diverse groups of students whose courses may only comprise 2-3 hours of contact time per week. This work with adults has attempted to reconcile the expectations of students ('we want to get cracking on our courses') and those of teachers ('we haven't got enough hours to deliver the syllabus as it is').

From her research at Kensington and Chelsea College, Amanda Hayes has concluded that one of the main needs of adult students is the sense of belonging to a group. This is supported by a recent survey of 200 adult learners which recorded the following pre-course concerns and anxieties:

- *the course would be too hard (90%)*
- *everyone else on the course would be cleverer (70%)*
- *the course would not fit in with other commitments (over 60%)*
- *the course would be too expensive (over 50%)*

(1997c)

Given these pervasive anxieties, induction should be regarded not as an event but as a process spread over two or three weeks, where development of a group ethos should have a high priority for tutors. Croydon CETS research confirms the validity of accepted AE practice:

Attention must be given to social matters during the first session so that all students feel welcome, valued and integrated into the class group. Particular attention must be given to involve students who are new to a continuation course.

As well as the class activities, tutors and other staff must recognise the importance of the coffee break as a social experience and outlet. All classes should be long enough to include provision for a coffee break. This is especially important in the languages programme area, where drop-out is highest and where classes currently last for one and a half hours only with no break. Language classes must be increased to two hours to allow time for a break, both for socialising and to maximise learning.

(M. Vick, 1997)

Details of a similar initiative in Walsall College within a freestanding and accredited induction programme are given in P. Martinez, 1996. At Hartlepool, the Care and Service Sector Department has developed a three-day induction programme, led by course tutors, with four principal aims:

- students get to know each other
- students get to know their tutor
- tutors identify students who may be hesitant or lacking in confidence
- tutors set clear standards and communicate these to students.

One of the most ambitious mechanisms to link enhanced group cohesion with the development of learning skills has been initiated at Lambeth. Working loosely from the work of Graham Gibbs (1992), tutors initiate study networks within the first three weeks of a course. There is no standard model: the network can be based on geographical proximity of students, choice of subject options or any other appropriate variable. The networks are intended to provide formal or informal self-help groups for all students, although part-time students and students with heavy course work demands may find them particularly helpful.

The purpose of the study networks is to:

- encourage interaction between students
- provide peer support
- provide peer motivation
- establish 'informal mechanisms to encourage attendance'
- 'keep each other going'
- fulfil the mutual desire to help and be helped
- address 'the isolation of studying alone'.

The college has also developed a number of simple team building exercises to assist in developing these networks during the first week or two of a course.

FIGURE 21: STUDY NETWORK TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISES (LAMBETH COLLEGE)

1. *An exchange of relevant information: names, addresses, phone numbers, work experience, study experience, etc.*
2. *A discussion involving sharing of experiences about how students have managed to cope with studying in the past, survival strategies, etc.*
3. *An exercise in which students in their groups learn to share information. This could involve simulated phone calls.*
4. *A brainstorm around the question: What practical steps can we take in our study network which will help us learn? The outcomes will be displayed and subsequently typed up and circulated.*
5. *The creation of group action plans identifying ways in which group members are going to help each other when given their first assignment.*
6. *Identification of issues/problems which might prompt members to leave the course. Discussion around how to support each other at such critical points.*

(J. Houghton, 1996)

In a number of colleges, student representatives have been invited to join course teams. It is hoped that this will provide an effective channel of communication, ensure that student concerns are formally brought to the attention of staff and provide feedback. At Kensington and Chelsea College, staff found that additional benefits included the fostering of group identity and the creation of positive relationships between student representatives and course directors.

Within the general strategy of fostering group identity, students are also encouraged, at Kensington and Chelsea, to provide peer support. 'Buddying' students are paired-up so that anyone who is absent can rely on their 'buddy' taking notes for them and passing information on, thereby reducing the likelihood of intermittent attendance resulting in permanent withdrawal. Hairdressing students have developed a 'self-help' version of 'buddying' which includes swapping notes and also audio-taping sessions for students who miss classes.

EARLY SUCCESS IN LEARNING

The apparent opposition between the needs of induction and those of the course has been specifically addressed by several colleges.

At South East Essex College, the aim is for students to undergo the induction process 'without realising it'. This is partly to satisfy a student desire to make progress on course as quickly as possible, and partly to strengthen the alignment between induction and course. In the past, some adult students have been disappointed in their course because of expectations developed during induction. The main elements of induction are therefore:

- introduction to the course (learning and assessment on the course including the course handbook)
- introduction to the College (the tutors, facilities, services and expectations)
- introduction to different ways of learning (assignment work to appraise and develop study skills)
- a learning contract which explains what they can expect from the College as well as what the College expects from them
- additional diagnostic assessment
- study skills advice packs to provide help and support through the early part of the course.

This is complemented by enhanced individual action planning, where the personal tutor and student will discuss:

- starting point, i.e. previous experience and qualifications
- aims and aspirations, e.g. employment and progression aims
- course requirements to meet these aims
- additional requirements, e.g. support needs, work experience, etc.

PROVISION FOR LATE ENTRANTS

Enrolments after courses have started and course transfers evidently cause problems for both students and teachers. Where teachers were invited to select a specific action research at Knowsley Community College, one of the most popular choices was the development of processes and material to support late entrants. The table below illustrates the range and diversity of approaches which were adopted.

FIGURE 22: KNOWSLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS TO SUPPORT LATE ENTRANTS

Programme area	Measures
General Education	Staff development; new structures for reception interview; additional tutorial support from HE students.
Access	Schedule of work for first three weeks, describing assessment and learning outcomes and providing a guide to reading; additional guidance from personal and subject tutors; development of a peer mentoring system.
Floristry	Pack of introductory materials including general induction and course specific course materials.
English	Learner's pack comprising a general guide for all English courses and a separate introduction to A and AS level English Language.
Hairdressing	Production of late enroller's pack and introduction of 'study buddies' to befriend late entrants and help them catch up with work.

Knowsley Community College, 1995

At Newcastle College, induction booklets and materials-based learning packages covering the first three weeks of the course have been devised for late entry students (M. Hughes, 1996).

RAISING STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

The problem of low expectations and difficulty in effecting a transition from school can extend to sixth-form colleges as they broaden their intakes, and to colleges in rural settings. Most systematic development work, however, seems to have been done in urban colleges. Staff from inner-city colleges in particular have identified particular problems connected with historically low participation rates in full-time post-16 education, low achievement at school, and poorly developed study skills. Approaches to address this issue can best be illustrated through the experience of Carol Anstess, describing work undertaken as Deputy Head of Business Studies during 1992-5.

CASE STUDY: BUSINESS STUDIES DEPARTMENT (HARTLEPOOL COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION)

The College is quite small (7,000 enrolments; £7m budget) with five academic departments. It is located in an area with high structural unemployment arising from the abrupt decline of traditional industry during the 1980s. Participation rates in full-time post-16 education were low. Where other curriculum areas had substantial part-time (youth training) enrolments, this department had few, and was forced to address directly issues of retention among full-time students.

Carol Anstess identified how a pervasive culture of low motivation and expectation among some students could lead to quite distinct effects on students and staff:

A nine-point retention strategy was developed to address these specific issues:

1. Awareness raising and dispelling myths about retention; staff development on the funding methodology.
2. Clear entry criteria.
3. Student agreement: about what is expected of students and what students could expect.
4. Induction programme to promote group cohesion, get to know tutor and for tutor to identify hesitant participants.
5. Skills development programme (two hours led by tutor) including emphasis on teamwork and practical projects (fundraising for charity, making videos, organising parents evenings).
6. Directed time programme (subsequently supported by an independent learning centre).

7. Monitoring attendance on a daily basis and taking follow-up action; subsequent computerisation of register system.
8. Careful scheduling of and strict deadlines for assignments.
9. Monitoring of achievement of assignment deadlines and of grade compilation.

OUTCOMES

- improved retention rates across the department (in some instances 100% for two-year courses)
- improved attendance across the department
- improved pass rates and progression
- Grade 1 on inspection for Business Studies.

INDUCTION AND STUDENT MOTIVATION: SOME CONCLUSIONS

- There seems to be some agreement that induction is important for both full and part-time students and that it should be regarded as a process rather than as an event.
- Component elements of that process which have been emphasised in different colleges include group forming, raising expectations, motivating and encouraging students, providing opportunities for early success and providing support for late entrants.
- Information giving about the course/programme and about the college remains important but seems to be taking a smaller proportion of the time allocated for induction purposes.
- Partly as a consequence of the trends noticed above, the dividing line between induction processes and programmes of study appear to be becoming more blurred.

8. Tutoring

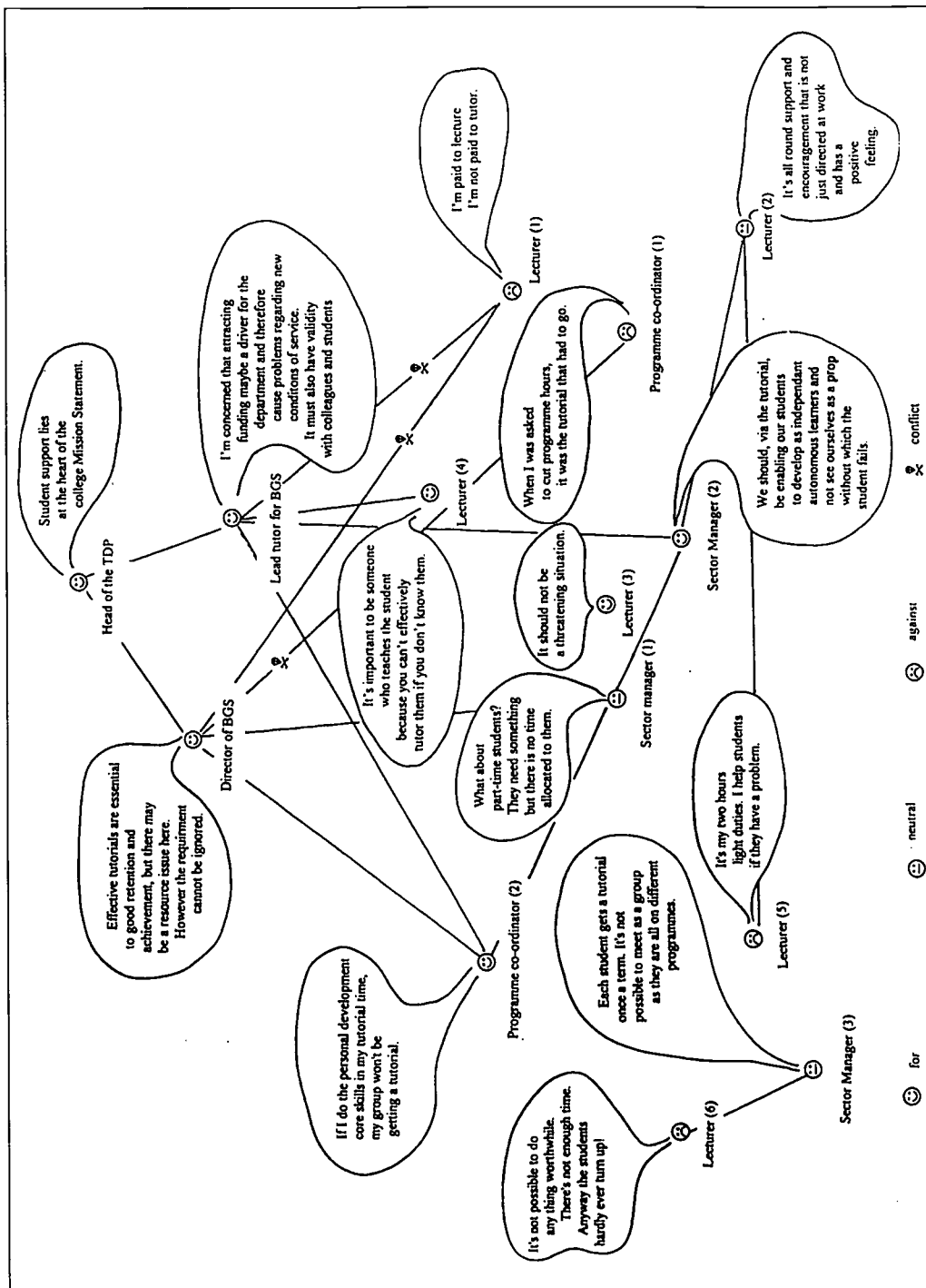
If there are two major priorities shared by virtually all colleges in the project, they are improvements to tutoring systems and better monitoring and tracking of student progress. The very popularity of tutoring as a cornerstone of college retention strategies makes generalisation very difficult: quite diverse solutions have been developed for very different sets of issues, local contexts and starting points.

If it is possible to identify a trend, it is probably that the trajectory of changes in tutoring is rather different in sixth form colleges, tertiary and FE colleges and the adult education sector.

Sixth-form colleges and similar colleges tend to have formal and well-developed tutoring systems, where tutors are supported by senior tutors. Until recently, their focus was strongly pastoral, sometimes with a tutorial programme (e.g. personal and social education) or key skills. Key administrative functions (e.g. UCAS applications, information giving) are usually also delivered by tutors. Students often met their tutors daily as a group with a further period of time (one to two hours) dedicated to individual and/or group tutorials. The primary function of the senior tutors is to offer support and professional supervision to tutors and to counsel, guide and occasionally discipline students, where previous contact with personal tutors had not succeeded in resolving whatever problems or issues were in play. Given the nature of the A-level programme, there is a general preference for a tutor to teach his/her tutor group for at least part of their timetable.

In FE and tertiary colleges, by way of contrast, tutoring systems are generally rather more recent in origin and tend to be developed and formalised within different faculties or departments. Given the growing emphasis placed by colleges on tutorials, the apparent variation in practice between curriculum areas, the absence of well-embedded supporting structures across the college (e.g. senior tutors) and the sheer size of many tutoring systems, the priorities in the first years after incorporation have been to establish systems across colleges and to introduce some degree of standardisation. This process has not been easy. Colleges have encountered substantial difficulty in agreeing arrangements across schools or faculties and, occasionally, even agreeing what level of standardisation is appropriate. Even within a department there can be difficulties, largely associated with pressures on time and staff. A 'rich picture' analysis of attitudes and beliefs in respect of tutoring is set out on the next page. This is based on a particular analysis of a business and general studies department, but is quite representative of issues encountered elsewhere.

FIGURE 23: TUTORING ISSUES IN A BUSINESS STUDIES AND GENERAL STUDIES DEPARTMENT: A 'RICH PICTURE'



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The main issues which many FE colleges are now addressing are therefore quality and tutor development. Systems are largely in place comprising:

- student entitlements
- tutoring procedures
- rooming arrangements
- tutoring roles
- tutor handbooks
- standards for tutoring
- evaluation arrangements
- specified tutorial programmes.

The problem remains one of variable quality and sometimes disagreement about over-riding purpose. Student experience is often highly dependent on the personal qualities and competencies of their tutor. This is almost certainly due both to the rate of change and the processes by which such changes have been introduced.

From these rather different starting points, a new consensus seems to be emerging between sixth-form, FE and tertiary colleges concerning the essential purpose and function of tutorials. This consensus is broadly represented in the following changes:

- in different ways, the objective in all three types of organisation has been to develop the role of tutor towards 'manager' and co-ordinator of student learning, embodying in the role pedagogic and personal support functions
- a consequential change in emphasis to giving the tutor a key role in monitoring tracking and supporting student progress
- an emphasis on the tutor as the co-ordinator and sometimes deliverer of support for basic education skills and, more frequently, for key skills
- a clarification of tutorial objectives and tutor requirements often associated with the development of role and person specifications, tutor handbooks and programmes for tutorial activity
- a parallel clarification of student entitlement, sometimes linked to the development of standards for tutoring
- tutor development programmes, sometimes within an accreditation framework, which are either voluntary or which have some element of compulsion.

This might best be illustrated by detailed reference to a particular college experience.

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CASE STUDY: TUTORING AT WILBERFORCE COLLEGE

The college has grown to around 1,000 FTE students (700 in 1994). Its curriculum has diversified but A-level programmes remain very important. It caters for mainly young, full-time students in the East Hull urban fringe where some schools have been struggling: GCSE point scores are low and three of seven partner schools were identified as failing by OFSTED inspectors.

The main changes in the tutoring systems include:

- change in focus to emphasise the key role of tutor in monitoring and supporting student progress
- greater selectivity in the appointment of tutors, many of whom now have two or three tutor groups
- weekly group or individual tutorials
- replacement of PSE by A-level General Studies and provision of flexible and learning facilities to support students
- refocusing college MIS systems to enable tutors to act as users rather than suppliers of information
- greater sensitivity in the construction of tutor groups so that they reflect subject choice and encourage the maintenance of friendship networks.

To take one measure of student satisfaction, tutorial attendance increased substantially. In second-year A-level courses, it rose on average from 58% (1994/5) to 71% (1995/6). As a result of the tutoring and other retention strategies, completion rates also rose during the same period as follows:

Programme	1994-1995	1995-1996
Single year programmes	67.9%	72.1%
A-levels (Year 1)	83.7%	90.9%
A-levels (Year 2)	94.2%	96.2%
GNVQ Advanced (Year 1)	71.2%	73.2%
GNVQ Advanced (Year 2)	67.8%	72.1%

With some variation in structure and content, similar changes in the role of tutoring have been implemented in Paston Sixth Form College, North Lincolnshire, Lambeth, South Tyneside, Grimsby, Bexley, Hastings, Tameside, Salford, South East Essex, Stockport and Hartlepool Colleges. Slight variations in the approach of different colleges tend, if anything, to reinforce the notion of an emerging consensus:

- Salford has introduced Open College Network (OCN) accredited key skills in its tutoring programme.
- Tameside has established a team of tutor mentors to support tutors and provide additional tutorials for students who are identified as being most at risk.
- Hastings (Health and Social Care Sector) has experimented with flexible tutoring (monitoring the ‘feel good factor’ of its students and providing additional tutoring as the need arises).
- North Lincolnshire has specified four key roles for tutors: recording and reviewing, personal development of students, academic development and partial support.
- Solihull College of Further Education has developed an OCN and credit accumulation and transfer (CATs) accredited framework specifying learning competencies suitable for both students and tutors.
- Worthing Sixth-Form College has retained a quite traditional system of daily registration and PSE programme but the latter now has OCN accreditation and the college has extended all teachers’ job descriptions with a very detailed task specification for tutoring.

TUTORS AS LEARNING MANAGERS

One of the more radical developments of this sort of model has occurred at Loughborough College, discussed in the case study below.

CASE STUDY: TUTORING AND LEARNER-MANAGED TIME (LOUGHBOROUGH COLLEGE)

Loughborough is an FE college in a small midlands town with around 2,000 full-time and 6,500 part-time enrolment and a budget of some ten million pounds.

A cluster of issues was identified in the GNVQ Intermediate Business Studies programme including:

- poor retention and pass rates
- variable effectiveness of tutoring across the college
- poor monitoring of attendance
- difficulty in integrating key skills (taught by specialists), not seen as vocationally relevant
- problems of time management and self organisation
- action planning processes not producing anticipated benefits and variable enthusiasm among students.

The local solutions, developed as part of the course review, were to develop a new curriculum model with a substantial amount of timetabled 'learner management time' (LMT) and to clarify and extend the role of tutors, now designated as learning tutors.

Essentially, full-time students have 19 hours per week timetabled activity comprising nine hours vocational teaching, three hours additional subject teaching and up to seven hours learner management time. Part of the LMT would be taught; the remainder is independent study or project work, on assignments. Personal tutoring and key skills delivery and assessment occur within the taught elements of LMT. Personal tutoring is conducted on a one-to-one basis for one hour per week per student and includes monitoring and tracking, action planning and portfolio building. This curriculum structure is illustrated overleaf.

To address issues of student uncertainty, lack of confidence, difficulties in time management and unfamiliarity with action planning, a new and more detailed model of action planning was introduced. Progress review and action planning had previously taken place on a six weekly cycle. This was supplemented by a process to prepare very detailed action plans for each week, and indeed each LMT session. The sort of documentation which the college developed is illustrated on the next page.

FIGURE 24: LOUGHBOROUGH COLLEGE INTERMEDIATE GNVQ ACTION PLAN

Essentially, full-time students have 19 hours per week timetabled activity comprising 9 hours vocational teaching, 3 hours additional subject teaching and up to 7 hours learner management time. Part of the LMT would be taught; the remainder is independent study or project work, on assignments. Personal tutoring and key skills delivery and assessment occur within the taught elements of LMT. Personal tutoring is conducted on a 1:1 basis for 1 hour per week per student and includes monitoring and tracking, action planning and portfolio building. This curriculum structure is illustrated overleaf.

To address issues of student uncertainty, lack of confidence, difficulties in time management and unfamiliarity with action planning, a new and more detailed model of action planning was introduced. Progress review and action planning had previously taken place on a six weekly cycle. This was supplemented by a process to prepare very detailed action plans for each week, and indeed each LMT session. The sort of documentation which the college developed is illustrated below:-

Loughborough College

GNVQ Intermediate in Business - Learning Management Time - Action Plan

Name Week Commencing

Tuesday 10.45 - 12.15	Wednesday 9.00 - 10.30	Thursday 3.00 - 4.00	
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Targets				
Achieved?				
If not, why not?				
How this problem can be avoided in the future				
Rescheduling				

FIGURE 25: LOUGHBOROUGH COLLEGE INTERMEDIATE GNVQ BASIC CURRICULUM MODEL

19 HOURS WEEKLY TOTAL			
16 Hours - Basic GNVQ		3 Hours - Additionality	
60% - 9 Hours - Vocational Units	40% - 7 Hours - LMT	3 Hours - Additionality	'Extra Additionality' if funding available or 'loss' leader
9 Hours for Vocational Units 3 Units @ 3 hrs per week over half year, 16 week semester = 6 units per year	7 Hours for LMT LMT includes: ▶ Managed Learning ▶ Progress & Tracking ▶ Core Skills Delivery & Assessment ▶ Personal Tutoring	3 Hours Additionality ▶ Additional Units ▶ 'A' Level (Adv) ▶ GCSE (Int) ▶ NVQ Units ▶ Learning/Language Support	

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In effect, the learning tutors are combining four roles: personal and subject tutor, key skills teacher and promoter and co-ordinator of independent learning. This has placed considerable demands on the learning tutors. As well as specialist teaching, they are now expected to act as learning experts with a substantial requirement for knowledge of the course and vocational area, and competences in action planning and review and key skills. They have been supported through staff development and resource materials and guidance in the new role.

The development of learning tutor skills remains an issue, as does the resource cost of the model. On the other hand, this quite radical extension of the tutoring role has achieved a number of successful outcomes and has now been extended to other curriculum areas within the college.

- good retention (1995-6): 84% completion (two students emigrated; one student got a job)
- improved pass rates (1995-6 : 100%)
- improved grading evidence
- good relationship between learning tutor and student
- good transferable skill development
- better monitoring of progress and attendance
- flexible model that can cope with diverse student needs (e.g. international students)
- generally favourable evaluation and feedback from students.

In different contexts and with different programmes, tutors have adopted similar roles as managers and facilitators of student learning in the engineering department of Solihull College (see page 99) and in the Access to the caring professions programme at Amersham and Wycombe College (see below page 90).

TUTORING IN ADULT EDUCATION

Tutoring issues in adult education are rather different from those described above for five main reasons:

- the distinction between teaching and tutoring is blurred where the teacher is the main, and perhaps only, member of staff the student may get to know and is often referred to as the 'course tutor'
- the overwhelming majority of adult education tutors are part time
- the level of student contact with the college or adult education service may be relatively small
- specialist student services, learning and student support mechanisms may be resourced at a much lower level than in colleges or indeed may not exist at all
- separate tutorial sessions are rarely available for part-time students.

In this context, the quality of tutoring has become absolutely essential to retention strategies. This can be illustrated by reference to developments in Kent and Oldham Adult Education Services.

CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING TUTORS AND TUTORING (KENT ADULT EDUCATION SERVICE)

Kent is the largest adult education service in England with 150,000 students, and 3,500 part-time staff and around 12,000 courses.

Over the last four years, the service has sought to develop a more strategic approach to the quality of the learning experience with a focus on the student viewpoint.

The general framework is set out in the illustration below. Essentially, the strategy takes the student journey as its basis and addresses four issues relating to each stage of this journey:

- the position of the learner
- the sorts of questions students will ask
- the tasks of tutors and other staff
- the response of the service both in supporting tutors and providing a managerial framework.

Elements of the strategy with a particular focus on tutors include:

- **Recruitment:** making it clear at appointment that the service expects tutors to project the adult ethos of the service, work with a mentor and take part in training and professional review procedures.
- **Induction:** required for all new tutors; provides an introduction and orientation to the philosophy and ethos of the service.
- **Mentoring:** for all new tutors and tutors who refer themselves (or are referred) to the scheme; includes peer observation and a development programme for mentors.
- **Training:** with a particular emphasis on achieving standards for teaching.
- **Assessment:** in the first instance, for all tutors within the mentoring scheme.

CASE STUDY: TUTORING ON ACCESS COURSES (OLDHAM YOUTH AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION SERVICE)

The Access programme is fully unitised and comprises over 40 courses. Students select from courses at two different levels to create their programme. Courses are delivered in a number of different centres; many of these are located in areas of economic and educational deprivation. The average level of funding (ALF) is £8.50 and almost all tutors are part time. There are no selection criteria for the introductory level courses.

ISSUES

In 1993, the issues identified by managers included:

- variable and quite low retention rates (30%-60%)
- little monitoring and recording
- an emphasis on recruiting rather than retaining students
- a preoccupation with recruiting the minimum numbers required to run the courses (i.e. twelve)
- tolerance and occasionally encouragement of withdrawal to enable tutors to 'work with the best students'.

FIGURE 26: STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Pre-entry	At entry	On course	At end
Learner position:			
Potential learners have not yet made a decision about learning still less about whether the service or course is appropriate to them.	Student decided, welcomed and inducted into the process of learning.	Embarked on the course. The effectiveness of the course in meeting students needs had to be ensured.	Now qualified /accredited/ completed need the next step – education.
Questions to answer:			
What is available to me? What do I want to do? How can this course help? What would it demand of me? What will I gain?	Where is everything? Is there anything here to help me? What will I be doing? How do I get support?	How am I doing? Is the course interesting and varied? Am I supported and guided when needed? Is the course living up to my expectations?	Where will I go next? Did I achieve what I expected/ wanted? What could this open up for me in the future?
Task:			
Encourage learning	Welcome and support	Ensure teaching and learning are structured to the requirements of the learners	Enable the learner to take the next step
Institutional response:			
<p>The diagram illustrates the institutional response through several interconnected components represented by double-headed arrows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching/Learning assessment: A long double-headed arrow spanning the top of the institutional response section. Clerical training guidance: A double-headed arrow on the left side. Special support GCSE+A-levels: A double-headed arrow in the center-left. Course review: A double-headed arrow in the center-right. Tutor's core unit on guidance: A double-headed arrow on the right side. Course outlines: A double-headed arrow on the bottom left. Guidance standards: A long double-headed arrow spanning the bottom of the institutional response section. 			

STRATEGY ELEMENTS

The main elements of the Oldham strategy were to:

- improve advice and guidance prior to entry, through the inclusion of guidance in the first session of all courses and the introduction of a telephone helpline
- introduce a student induction programme – week zero – with an emphasis on groupwork and settling students into their courses
- raise awareness of the funding methodology and the implications of withdrawal on the service's budget among part-time tutors
- emphasise and integrate study techniques within courses
- encourage tutors to follow-up student absences and send handout materials with a note of encouragement to help students catch up
- encourage and support tutor development with a particular emphasis on assessment practice, the provision of positive, formative assessment and feedback and the effective teaching of study skills
- provide feedback to tutors on their own and other tutors retention rates and summaries of student feedback.

OUTCOMES

- Retention rates on 35-week advanced level courses have increased to between 58 and 62% (1995-6).
- The average retention rate across all 16 week courses has increased by 10% to 84%.
- Student evaluations have been positive with high levels of satisfaction being expressed for relevance, clarity, support from tutors, enjoyment, learning, discussion and debates.

TUTORING: SOME CONCLUSIONS

At the risk of gross over simplification, trends in the development of tutoring reflect the different context of sixth-form colleges, further education colleges and adult education services.

- In sixth-form colleges, the trend is mainly towards a greater emphasis on student learning and/or the integration of pastoral care and learning objectives.
- For further education and large tertiary colleges, on the other hand, the priority has been to standardise what are often very different practices across the college.
- In adult education, the greatest emphasis has been placed on improving the support function offered by the course tutor.
- Notwithstanding these differences, however, certain similarities can be detected:
 - in different ways, the objective in all three types of organisation has been to develop the role of tutor towards 'manager' and co-ordinator of student learning, embodying in the role pedagogic and personal support roles
 - a consequential change in emphasis is to give the tutor a key role in monitoring tracking, and supporting student progress
 - an emphasis on the tutor as the co-ordinator and sometimes deliverer of support for basic education skills and, more frequently, for key skills
 - a clarification of tutorial objectives and tutor requirements often associated with the development of role and person specifications, tutor handbooks and programmes for tutorial activity
 - a parallel clarification of student entitlement, sometimes linked to the development of standards for tutoring
 - tutor development programmes, sometimes within an accreditation framework, which are either voluntary or which have some element of compulsion.

9. Curriculum strategies for retention

The very title of this section immediately raises the question about what is meant by 'strategy'. For the past twenty years an exhaustive and occasionally exhausting debate has been conducted in the management literature about the nature of strategy (see, for example, T. Cannon 1984, I. Ansoff 1990, M. Porter 1981, E.E. Chaffee 1985, H. Mintzberg 1990, H. Mintzberg and J. B. Quinn 1991, G. Cole 1994).

Further and adult education have specific contexts and starting points: externally – pressures of competition and limited resources, the auditing reporting requirements of funding bodies and the exigencies of inspection. Internally, little experience of strategic planning and management meant their capabilities were relatively under developed on incorporation. Curriculum strategy has, therefore, been largely focused on the production of strategic and operational plans, the creation of robust and effective planning processes and infrastructure, cost reduction, the management and development of the curriculum portfolio and the diversification of the customer base (see, for example, P. Martinez, 1995).

Major structural changes in the organisation of the curriculum have been addressed in a variety of Staff College/FEU/FEDA publications on flexible colleges, resource-based learning (RBL) and modularisation/unitisation. In the light of this extensive body of work, is there anything new, different or noteworthy arising from colleges' work on student retention? The answer appears to be 'Yes' in three specific ways.

First, the strategies reviewed here are almost invariably developed on the basis of practical experience. This work is premised largely on the formulation of and solution to problems, informed by the professional knowledge and experience of managers and teachers. It is not primarily inspired by models of strategy developed in other industrial or service sectors.

The major focus of these strategies is, secondly, internal and fixed primarily on the immediate customers: students. This is hardly surprising given their aim. What may be less obvious is that the strategies themselves and the processes by which they have been identified, selected and implemented bear a remarkable resemblance to business process re-engineering (BPR) approaches which have been fashionable in commercial manufacturing and service industries since the late 1980s (M. Hammer, J. Champy 1993, H.J. Johansson 1993). This is not to say that colleges were necessarily inspired by BPR approaches. Indeed, none of the colleges here directly and explicitly derives its strategy from such a model. Nevertheless, it can be argued that in this domain they have little to learn from their more experienced peers outside the education sector.

To improve their retention rates, colleges have had to address the difficult and all-important issues of strategy implementation. In doing so, they have of necessity, thirdly, had to resolve practical questions and in particular issues around the coherence of different initiatives, the 'fit' between curriculum

strategy and other aspects of the college and its student populations and the two-way link between strategy and operations.

So what do these strategies look like? Broadly speaking, they comprise key decisions and policies about the content, outcomes, processes, structures and organisation of the curriculum. They are often -- but not always -- determined on a cross-college basis by senior managers. They are usually expressed in college strategic plans, although the emphasis here is on strategies in action (which are not always identical to formally declared strategies). They are usually multi-faceted and multi-dimensional in order to comprehend and address the complexity of issues around student persistence and drop-out.

In no particular order of priority, the main curriculum strategies to improve student retention fall into five broad areas:

- curriculum audit
- course development
- curriculum structure and timetabling
- learning support
- learning to learn.

Obviously, taking a broad definition of the curriculum, these strategies have been introduced alongside and as well as the strategies reviewed in previous sections: pre-enrolment services, student assessment, induction and tutoring. They are also complemented by further strategies we shall examine below for student support, student tracking and follow up and resource allocation.

CURRICULUM AUDIT

A number of colleges, particularly large FE colleges (Lambeth, North Lincolnshire, South East Essex, Hartlepool, Tameside), have undertaken more or less formal curriculum audit to ensure that an appropriate curriculum offer is developed. The typical criteria which have been applied are:

- breadth (usually in relation to vocational strengths and the offers made by other providers)
- depth (appropriate range of courses from entry to advanced level and sometimes extending to HE)
- progression (opportunities for internal and external progression), points and the establishment of new learning pathways through modularisation, unitisation or both.

Curriculum audit is predicated on a relatively well known and well developed methodology (see for example FEU, 1993). In one respect, however, the approach developed in Tameside offers a new refinement of this approach.

At this college, courses were audited against six criteria of flexibility.

FIGURE 27: CRITERIA FOR AUDIT OF COURSE FLEXIBILITY (TAMESIDE COLLEGE)

- more than one opportunity to enrol
- opportunity for continuous enrolment
- availability of assessment on demand
- availability of APEL
- pace of learning (i.e. availability of different learning pathways)
- mixed mode of delivery.

Each course was assigned a numerical score against these criteria and the point scores were aggregated to programme areas.

The College's quality manager was surprised by the degree of correspondence between high point scores and high student retention. In the light of this outcome, targets for flexibility have been agreed across the college.

Commentary

- Curriculum audit clearly has a role in developing a curriculum to maximise student retention.
- This technique is well documented and developed and will usually involve audit against criteria of breadth, depth, progression and flexibility.
- Pilot work in one college (Tameside) to investigate the inverse relationship between course flexibility and drop-out rates, suggests that this can be an additional useful audit criterion.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Many colleges have experimented with new courses to meet the needs of students who would otherwise fail. North Lincolnshire has introduced 6-10 week Open Door and Step Into College courses. These are OCN accredited and comprise activities which build confidence and assertiveness, include a variety of taster opportunities and provide guidance, assessment and in-depth interviews, mainly for adult students. The intention is partly to emphasise, build on and celebrate what students can do, partly to overcome 'threshold

fear'; partly to assist students in making their choice of course and partly to provide a successful learning experience for students who may not have participated in formal education for some years. A similar range of pre-Access courses was introduced at South East Essex College and there are many similarities with the Activate Course developed at Walsall and reviewed in depth in P. Martinez (1996).

Different models have been developed at North Tyneside and Hackney Colleges. In the former, a one-year foundation course concentrates on developing learning skills, study habits and self-esteem and has achieved 79% completion rates among groups of at-risk students. In the latter, a one-year full-time ESOL course has been put in place. This provides for students whose English is insufficient to enable them to join one of the mainstream vocational courses. At several other colleges, curriculum mapping to support the college's open Access mission has revealed the need for a more extensive curriculum offer at entry and/or foundation levels.

Experience at two colleges suggest that this sort of strategy does not always work as intended. At Hastings, two new courses were introduced mainly for mature students in the health and social care sector: RSA Initial Award in Care and Way In for Women (an ABE course including study skills and confidence building). While the courses worked for some students, drop-out remained quite high and the division is now trying a different approach with a GNVQ intermediate group specifically for mature students. At Knowsley, the difficulty was one of take up. Teachers developed three OCN-accredited units to provide maths enhancement for their A-level science courses. Most of their students, however, chose to follow different options.

Commentary

- Auditing and mapping the curriculum against the needs of intended students provides an effective means of managing the curriculum offer and investigating the need for new courses.
- Even within this relatively small sample of colleges, at least five sorts of new course can be identified:
 - Introductory courses comprising elements of guidance, confidence building and taster sessions.
 - An extension of the range of modular and unitised courses (see next section).
 - Specific courses to develop basic or study skills or both for target student groups and offered in a generic form.
 - Vocationally specific entry or foundation level courses.

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- Courses which deepen or broaden or otherwise extend the curriculum portfolio to satisfy the needs of students whom the college would otherwise have to turn away or place in inappropriately.

Risks associated with new course development and implementation can be minimised by following tried and tested methods of initial research and analysis, close monitoring and formative evaluation.

CURRICULUM STRUCTURES AND TIMETABLING

The arguments in favour of modularisation (crudely, redesigning learning inputs into fairly short modules) and unitisation (moving from end tests to cumulative assessment usually within a credit framework) do not need to be rehearsed here in detail. Broadly, the advantages of the former lie in more focused and shorter learning opportunities which allow greater student choice, and more flexibility in coping with interruptions, sequencing and group composition (where a given module may be common to several courses) and, for a given module, flexibility in learning pathways. The advantages of the latter lie in the possibility of APL/APEL, early student success, coping with interruptions, smaller, more diverse and more manageable assessment tasks and, arguably, a pattern of assessment more suited to the learning styles and strategies of many FE students. Taken together and implemented effectively, this curriculum structure may provide a platform for simultaneously enriching the curriculum and reducing unit costs. On the other hand, developments along these lines continue to attract criticism principally on the grounds of lack of coherence, lowering of standards, impracticality and cost.

Loughborough, Gateshead and North Lincolnshire have re-arranged the curriculum into six-week learning blocks with the seventh week devoted to catching up, directed learning, one-to-one tutorials and individual action planning and review.

One of the few attempts to situate a similar strategy securely within a framework for improving student retention has occurred in a project developed jointly by Lewisham and Woolwich Colleges.

CASE STUDY: UNITISATION TO PROMOTE STUDENT RETENTION (LEWISHAM AND WOOLWICH COLLEGES)

Achievement of national education and training targets is well below national average in the catchment areas served by these two London colleges. Students' learning skills are relatively poorly formed and this slows down the rate at which they are able to progress. The college student populations are mainly adult (i.e. age 19 and over) and are significantly disadvantaged in educational and economic terms.

The first focus for unitisation in this project was a relatively small number of curriculum areas: English/Communications, Maths/Numeracy, ESOL, IT, Fashion and Motor Vehicle Repair and Maintenance.

The issues which the project sought to address were:

- the absence of accreditation opportunities at entry level particularly, but not exclusively, for ESOL students and students with severe learning disabilities
- a need to develop qualifications with the potential to accredit relatively small and, therefore, more manageable amounts of learning
- the transience of many of their students and the consequent need to provide accreditation opportunities after relatively short periods of learning
- the need to repeat modules to allow students to start programmes at different times and to cope with interruptions of study
- the extension of accreditation to a number of courses offered during the summer
- the desire to offer alternative learning opportunities including open learning and learning via information and learning technology (ILT)
- the unwillingness of some students to commit themselves to long programmes
- increasing motivation through early success
- greater transparency in the learning process through the identification of learning outcomes
- anticipated problems with the JSA and, in particular, consequent interruptions to study.

Staff have been enthusiastic and the general conclusion is that these objectives have been realised with improved retention (particularly in the second and third terms in IT), and better student achievement. Additional benefits include:

- increased motivation attributable to the opportunity for learners to be assessed in their strongest skills (ESOL)
- greater responsibility accepted by students for their own learning (ESOL and IT)
- improved internal progression into vocational areas (from ESOL and ABE courses)
- encouragement of students to develop skills in breadth, depth or both (IT)
- the ability to develop accreditation for particularly fast moving areas of the curriculum in terms of demand (e.g. Internet and Multimedia) or delivery (e.g. summer schools, Saturday schools).

Work is continuing to create credit frameworks (in both colleges), introduce units in new curriculum areas and participate in the EDEXEL/FEDA project to credit rate a range of EDEXEL qualifications (Lewisham College).

(South Thames Unitisation Project, 1997 see Hodson and Hall, 1997)

Croydon CETS has used another version of the same strategy to address retention and achievement issues in its modern languages provision. Supported by SOLOTEC the service standardised levels, materials and learning outcomes using a modular framework of ten-week courses. Eighty courses, 35 tutors and over 1,200 students were involved. Follow-up in the event of absence was also improved, with tutors telephoning students immediately after a first non-notified absence. The outcomes were quite dramatic. Completion rates in 1996/7 have risen by some 10% compared with the previous year. Service and managers are confident that if the same methods are adopted across all its programmes, some 1,800 extra students will complete their courses each year.

In a different context, issues of course structure have come to the fore at Weston College where a preliminary analysis of student records indicated an anomaly. In most colleges, drop-out is concentrated in the first term and falls in subsequent terms. At Weston, by contrast, withdrawal was occurring in roughly equal proportions across the year. The particular feature of Weston (and presumably some similar colleges) is the seasonal nature of the local employment market. The strategy which the college is now working on will address this through modularisation, two term courses or a combination of the two.

Changes to curriculum structure do not necessarily have to take place across the whole or even a substantial part of the curriculum. Paston, Wilberforce and a number of other colleges have encouraged the adoption of modular A-levels without making modularisation obligatory across all subjects. In some craft areas, colleges like Hackney (plumbing) and Plymouth (construction) have taken advantages of the unit accreditation opportunities for NVQs to address specific issues of retention, achievement and motivation.

Wulfrun College has created a flexible curriculum structure intended to meet the needs of adult students through supported open learning. This is discussed in the case study below.

CASE STUDY: OPEN LEARNING CENTRES FOR ADULTS (WULFRUN COLLEGE)

Together with Bilston Community College and Wolverhampton TEC the college operates Wolverhampton Open Learning Centre in the middle of the town. It also runs a second centre within its Newhampton annexe, a few minutes walk from the centre of town.

The main aims of both facilities are to:

- increase adult participation in education
- enhance and complement existing provision
- maximise adult student success
- encourage progression to further study/work.

Around 80% of the 800 students enrolled at Wolverhampton OLC are not undertaking any other formal learning. Over 40% of the Open Learning Centre students come from ethnic minorities; at the Newhampton Centre just under 70% are from ethnic minority groups. In the two centres, just under 60% of students are unemployed.

Around 200 students attend in any week and attendances average two hours.

A large proportion of students have basic skills needs. Student enrolments by principal subject areas are as follows:

Wolverhampton Open Learning Centre

30% ABE

60% ABE and IT

Newhampton Centre

35% Access (to Higher Education)

40% ESOL

18% ABE

The college has developed a number of key strategies to achieve its objectives:

- wide publicity including leaflets in minority languages
- central locations with good public transport links
- an induction process geared to the needs of centre users and comprising practical information, an introduction to open learning and general orientation
- individual learning programmes which are written in the course of the first visit and which include student self-assessment and general study skills
- review and action planning based on a student record of work, with a more intensive review at around every tenth visit
- record keeping through a computerised database OLAF (Open Learning Administrators' Friend)
- an emphasis on making tutor support available in both centres beyond the formal processes of interviewing, induction and action planning
- development of Access to Resource Cards – mini guides to facilitate the use of the resources held in the centres
- reasonably long opening hours: 43 hours per week in the Wolverhampton Open Learning Centre and 41 hours per week in the Newhampton Centre
- close monitoring of student progress: the college will telephone students who have not attended for three weeks and will withdraw them after four weeks non-notified absence
- easily accessible guidance and advice service.

OUTCOMES

- Completion rates have risen to 80% (Newhampton) and just over 73% (Wolverhampton). The latter figure represents a 10% increase from 1995-6.
- Over a third (39% Newhampton; 34% Wolverhampton) of students progress to further study.
- In student perception surveys, 70% of users state that their confidence has improved. The same data suggests that factors which help students to complete their courses are, in descending order of importance, friendly and supportive staff; the student's own motivation; support from other students.

FIGURE 28: NEWHAMPTON STUDY CENTRE LEARNING NEEDS FORM

INITIAL INTERVIEW/LEARNING PROGRAMME		
NAME:	ENROLMENT No:	
COMMUNITY/PT/FT	DATE:	
Other current courses/training:		
Prior learning/achievements/skills:		
Referred by:	Self/Other (explain):	
Class Tutor:		
Course:		
INTERVIEWED BY:		DATE:
AIMS:		
Short-term		
Long-term		
STUDY CENTRE QUALIFICATION (e.g. Wordpower; Language; Study Skills; Jobsearch):		
<p>AGREED LEARNING NEEDS (to achieve aims) (Tutors - Please note any formal assessment method).</p> <p>T = Try, D = Develop</p>		
PRIORITY	SKILL AREA	T/D
	LANGUAGE Spelling punctuation Sentence structure ... Grammar General expression/ vocabulary STUDY General organisation/ Time Management ... Library & Research ... Listening Reading/ Comprehension Notemaking Summaries Essay Preparation Revision/exam techniques	
	BUSINESS/PRACTICAL Letters Memos Reports Meetings/Committees JOB SEARCH Written Telephone/interview ORAL e.g. talks/seminars/ presentations MATHEMATICS OTHER NEEDS (please describe) eg Computing	

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INITIAL WORK PLAN

DATE AGREED

TOPIC/SKILL AREA	SUGGESTED RESOURCES
1. focus on:	
2. focus on:	
3. focus on:	
4. focus on:	
5. focus on:	

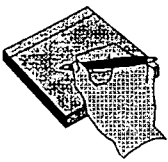
INITIAL PROGRESS REVIEW(S)

DATE	AREA(S) REVIEWED	STUDENT/TUTOR COMMENTS	FUTURE PLANS/ PROGRESSION

STUDENT'S GENERAL COMMENTS:

(e.g. please say what was most/least enjoyable and most/least helpful. Are there any changes you wish to make? Can you give examples of evidence of your progress?)

FIGURE 29: NEWHAMPTON STUDY CENTRE ACCESS TO RESOURCES CARD

Newhampton Study Centre		
 <h1>Access to Resources Card</h1>		
<u>Note Taking</u>		
		See
GETTING STARTED	Advice and tips.	<u>Filing cabinet 2 - Drawer A</u> Note taking guidelines/models.
EXAMPLES TO STUDY	Beginner Level	<u>Language for Life Shelves</u> - 'Basic Written English' by Don Shiach pages 83 - 85 - 'Getting to Grips with Writing' by C Hilton and M Hyder. Page 110 onwards.
	Moving on.	<u>Study Skills Shelves</u> 'English for Further Education' by C Hawkins and R Stangwick. Unit 3. 'The Good Study Guide' by Andrew Northedge Pages 41 - 47.
EXERCISES TO PRACTISE	Filing cabinet 2	- Drawer A Note taking exercises.
	Filing cabinet 1	- Drawer C (Business English) Working from Notes.
	Audio Tapes	- Language Power by Bob Matthews - Unit 2 - Activity 4B - Treating Bleeding. Unit 5 - Activity 4B - Page 161 Wounds. Unit 6 - Activity 4A - Page 178 - Home-brewing. Headway Intermediate - Tapescript 36 - 'Working at Home'. * The Right to Silence (if you are interested in Law) * Revision Techniques
	Video Tapes	* Inside English * Sickle Cell Anaemia.
SEE ALSO: 1. Telephone message practise card 2. Summarising Card.		
* Ask a tutor for these materials.		

If some agreement is emerging around a more flexible and student focused curriculum structure, timetabling issues are more contentious. In the context of a general reduction in taught course hours, and the need on the part of many students to balance conflicting demands of study, part-time work and caring, there seems to be a general tendency to concentrate timetabled hours. This, it is asserted, will achieve a number of objectives:

- avoid unnecessary journeys to college
- prevent students wasting substantial amounts of time between sessions
- accommodate part-time work, caring or other student commitments.

Evidence on this point is at best equivocal. The alternative and equally plausible view (in the absence of any detailed research) is that if students only attend for, say, two and a half or three days per week, they may actually find it more difficult to manage their study time and, by extension, may find it easier or more attractive to concentrate on alternatives to study or drift into full-time work.

This is certainly the experience at North Lincolnshire, which initially compressed its GNVQ timetable into two and a half days per week, but has subsequently reviewed this policy. All full-time GNVQ students are now expected to attend college for a minimum of twenty hours per week spread over five days.

I would be very interested to hear from colleagues who have conducted any sort of evaluation of changes in timetabling along the lines suggested above. It may be, and at this stage this is no more than a plausible hypothesis, that the issue is not so much the timetabling of taught hours but rather the structuring and content of directed time and hence the effectiveness of arrangements to promote learning to learn (see page 96). A second working hypothesis is that the 'threat' of student part-time work could be turned into an 'opportunity' given a sufficiently flexible curriculum design. Again, any experience whether positive or negative that colleagues are prepared to share with me would be very welcome.

It seems at least plausible that it may not be timetabling *per se* which achieves a significant impact, but rather the combination of timetabling, curriculum structure, teaching strategies and assessment design. Amersham and Wycombe College has succeeded in developing a popular Access programme for the caring professions which addresses these four issues directly.

CASE STUDY: ACCESS TO THE CARING PROFESSIONS (AMERSHAM AND WYCOMBE COLLEGE)

The course was designed around four major assumptions:

- It would be very difficult to affect external factors governing retention (e.g. finance, the Job Seekers Allowance, etc.). The course designers had, therefore, to focus their attention very closely on the curriculum factors which they could control.
- Students would be attracted to a course which emphasised flexibility.
- Students are already motivated – they would not come on the course otherwise – and one of the roles of teachers would be to enhance and reinforce this motivation.
- Many of the techniques used in the design and delivery of open learning could usefully be applied in the context of a taught course.

The specific features of this Access course include:

- a five-module structure over 36 weeks which is carefully paced in terms of levels of difficulty and challenge
- a detailed module guide specifying assignments, assessment criteria, reading lists and schemes of work
- explicit details of the course structure, learning objectives, assessment timetable and criteria in the guide; this enables students to work on their own if necessary and, in effect, contains the whole course
- modules are taught in three hour weekly sessions supplemented by one hour long tutorial slots
- students are recommended to buy A. Northedge's *Good Study Guide*
- induction is spread over the first four weeks and includes an introduction to discussion and debate, encouragement to write as soon as possible, the assessment of literacy, comprehension and writing skills and an introduction to the course and the scheme of work
- all students have a tutor who maps and tracks their progress
- tutoring is targeted at students at risk; some students have a tutorial every six weeks; some every week. Tutorials are more frequent when students are under most pressure (e.g. revising for exams, creating UCAS applications)

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- 30 teaching hours are allocated to each tutor for telephone tutorials and follow-up
- students write eleven assignments every 36 weeks; a substantial amount of the assessment is based on their work placement; a final exam accounts for 20% of the overall assessment
- employers are involved both through the work placement and through the provision of a 'critical friend' for each student
- if students miss a session, tutors will telephone them
- fees are set deliberately low at: £135 per year.

OUTCOMES

Enrolment and achievement figures are as follows:

Year of completion	Enrolment	Achievement (numbers)	Achievement (%)
1992	12	10	83
1993	58	50	86
1994	102	95	93
1995	118	101	86
1996	122	106	86
1997	97	90 (estimated)	93 (estimated)

Students have acted as ambassadors in their workplaces and over 80% of enrolments are generated through personal recommendation.

- The experience of colleges reviewed here provides some empirical evidence that strategies to develop modular and/or unitised curricular can help to improve student retention.
- Such strategies do not necessarily have to be extended to the whole or even a substantial part of the curriculum.
- The main benefits from the perspective of students appear to include:
 - more explicit, transparent and hence achievable learning tasks

- briefer, clearer and more manageable assessments
- greater flexibility and choice
- enhanced motivation arising from early and repeated success. It is plausible (but by no means proven) that arrangements to promote Learning to Learn through the structuring and content of directed time may provide a more important variable than the timetabling of taught hours.

LEARNING SUPPORT

The variety of college strategies for learning support are reviewed in FEU, 1993 and 1997. All the colleges reviewed here have developed their learning support services, usually towards inclusive models of student entitlement as distinct from deficit or remedial models. Three college experiences are presented here as mini case studies to illustrate the richness and diversity of learning support strategies for student retention:

- an entitlement approach to basic skills
- mentoring
- linking learning support and the mainstream curriculum.

CASE STUDY: AN ENTITLEMENT APPROACH TO BASIC SKILLS (HASTINGS COLLEGE OF ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY)

The local socio-economic context is not particularly promising. Average incomes are below the national average and Hastings itself has Assisted Area Status.

The College has some 11,000 student enrolments (around 3,000 full-time). The annual FEFC budget is c.£6m and the ALF in 1995/6 was just over £20 per unit.

The Health & Social Care sector has grown quite rapidly. The first full-time course was only introduced in September 1991; by 1996-7, student enrolments in this sector had increased to over 200 most of which were full time. In 1993-4 achievement rates (46%) and retention rates (65%) were poor.

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The issues identified by staff included:

- low levels of basic skills among students
- poor integration of basic skills support within the vocational curriculum
- lack of confidence and self esteem amongst students
- lack of entry level provision.

This sector undertook a pilot development for the college. Working closely with specialists in ABE, a number of initiatives were undertaken between 1994 and 1996:

- creation of a basic skills study centre with a bank of vocationally specific materials
- screening of all full-time students during induction using ALBSU instruments
- students were encouraged to form supportive study groups
- additional support (double staffed sessions) was included on programmes
- vocational teachers received training from ABE specialists (some achieving the City & Guilds 9281 Initial Training for Basic Skills)
- greater flexibility was introduced into the scheduling of tutorials (concentrated on students whose 'feel good factor' was low)
- greater flexibility was introduced in final assessments to allow slower learners to complete beyond the end of the academic year
- progress and final outcomes were carefully monitored.

OUTCOMES

- the proportion of full-time students between 1994/5 and 1995/6 requiring basic skills support has remained fairly constant at around 40%
- qualitative evaluations from students have been favourable
- retention rates have improved from 65% to 85% across the sector.

(V. Bannister, 1996)

CASE STUDY: MENTORING SCHEME FOR BLACK STUDENTS (CITY AND ISLINGTON COLLEGE)

The college is large (18,000 enrolments), dispersed (11 sites) and caters for a multi-cultural student population. Some 60% of full-time students are black; 33% of students have English as a second language. The student population includes a substantial number of refugees.

The problems identified by the College in 1988/9, were that black students were relatively over-represented on lower level courses and among students who dropped-out.

A mentoring programme was introduced for African, South Asian and Caribbean students on full-time programmes in 1990. The aims of the programme were to:

- provide targeted students with mentoring support which would supplement existing curriculum and pastoral provision
- establish a network of mentors who would guide, support and encourage participating students
- establish a partnership between education, business, the voluntary sector and ethnic minority communities
- establish a supplementary curriculum.

The programme recruits mainly in the 16-25 age group and with a priority for 16-17 year olds and older refugee students. In 1995/6, over 700 students were involved in the programme. Mentors are mainly black adults who have been successful in their careers (increasingly including former students). They act as guides/advisers/role models for the students and received training to support them in these roles.

The supplementary curriculum includes:

- focus days involving a variety of activities (presentation skills, time management, cultural awareness)
- academic support workshops (assignment writing, maths, science)
- mentor seminars (led by and based on the skills and experiences of mentors)
- residential weekends
- visits (to universities, workplaces)
- social and cultural activities (cinema, theatre).

OUTCOMES

- positive evaluations from students and mentors
- Queen's Anniversary Award (1995)
- since its inception, over 300 mentor students have progressed to university
- in 1994/5 96% of students on the mentor programme completed their courses
- direct progression of many students into employment
- considerable success in recruiting mentors (around 600 to date).

CASE STUDY: DYSLEXIA SUPPORT PROGRAMME LINKING LEARNING SUPPORT AND THE MAINSTREAM CURRICULUM (LAMBETH COLLEGE)

Lambeth College is a large multi-site college in South London catering for disadvantaged socio economic groups. It has some 8,000 students of whom over half are full-time.

At incorporation, there was no cross-college support network. The Dyslexia Support Co-ordinator had attended an ALBSU National Development Project and noted the demand for dyslexia support in all parts of England and Wales. Where support had been developed as a result of the training and development initiative, demand had far outstripped supply. It was anticipated that Lambeth College would be no different from other organisations and institutions around the country.

The first priority was to identify the demand for dyslexia support. This was done by offering an embryonic support service.

STRATEGY (1992):

Immediate identified needs were to

- establish a cross-college dyslexia support service (at that time there were eight sites)
- identify demand for the service and monitor numbers of students requiring support
- publicise embryonic service and referral system to staff (staff booklet).

DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICE (POST 1993)

- staff awareness sessions in some departments/schools
- staff awareness booklet of good practice in the classroom (to all college staff)
- training staff to meet demand; requirement for dyslexia support trainees to give awareness sessions on sites where they work; inclusion of a member of the Dyslexia Support Service on each Course/School Team
- formalise systems for cross-college provision, including support, exam entitlement, rooming, equipment, budget, team building
- student support groups (empowerment for students to negotiate appropriate strategies within class)
- advocacy on behalf of students where required
- development funding from CENTEC for Dyslexia Community Project, thereby creating a direct link with dyslexic people not in education or training.

OUTCOMES

- Where dyslexia support has been established over a period of time, staff have become familiar with the difficulties which dyslexic students may have and are more likely to refer students for dyslexia or other support.
- Staff are less likely to make untested assumptions about student learning and are more likely to identify and respond to the actual learning needs of students.
- Teachers are more likely to adopt classroom strategies which are appropriate for dyslexic need, and experiment with teaching methods which may be of benefit to all students.
- Certain work-sheets, exercises and types of teaching have been abandoned or curtailed.
- A bank of materials is being compiled appropriate to students with different learning styles.
- Teaching methodology has become more explicit, more concrete and more aware of student need.
- Staff have been empowered to deal with issues around language processing difficulties in the classroom.

COMMENTARY

The following tentative inferences may be drawn from these three case studies:

- Learning support strategies can be highly effective in promoting student retention, particularly when they are based on local research or some other analysis of the specific local context, and are integrated with other curriculum strategies.
- They will have different characteristics to meet the needs of different student populations.
- Learning support strategies do not necessarily have to be centrally developed and led, but they will have the greatest impact if their goals are defined as inclusiveness and student entitlement across the college.
- Teaching techniques and strategies developed in specialist areas of the college (ABE, dyslexia) can improve provision across the college perhaps with particular reference to foundation and intermediate level students (see also R. Cooper, 1996).
- Experience in these colleges tends to confirm research undertaken by the Basic Skills Agency that around a third of students in many FE colleges require adult basic education support (BSA [1996]).
- Mentoring and peer support mechanisms can provide personal and academic support and reinforce the student's sense of belonging.
- Where learning support is made available in addition to and outside the course or programme, it will probably be necessary to establish or tighten up referral mechanisms. Stockport College, for example, found that referrals to dyslexia, literacy and language workshops were much more successful when tutors made initial appointments for their students.

LEARNING TO LEARN

Anecdotal evidence from a large number of colleges suggest that three very different agendas coincide and may indeed conflict under this heading. These might be described as conflicting drives for efficiency, effectiveness and key skills. Associated with the first, there are pressures to reduce taught hours and to increase the proportion of self-directed learning. This is referred to variously as resource-based learning, directed study, open or distance learning, workshop delivery, delivering through information and learning technology (ILT) and so on. Associated with the second, there are pressures inspired largely by educational concerns to enrich and vary learning experiences, empower students, increase student autonomy, improve learning to learn (metacognitive) skills. Analyses of current and future labour market needs and of the changing nature of technology inspire the third agenda, key skills, which overlaps under the theme 'learning for life' with the second.

Within the context of improving student retention, this aspect of curriculum strategy seems to be least fully explored. It is certainly true that virtually all the project colleges are experimenting with one or more aspects of learning to learn. To date, however, there is no large-scale project in the UK which has successfully evaluated student outcomes (retention, achievement) within this context. There are a number of partial evaluations. The former Department of Employment looked at the effectiveness of resource-based learning (DfEE 1995; Employment Department 1995) and conducted some studies of the development of metacognitive skills (N. Blagg et al. 1993, R. Seden, 1993). The limited nature of this research becomes evident, however, by making a comparison with the very intensive evaluation of a quite small scale Australian project (J. Baird and J. Northfield, 1993) and the quite extensive work which has been undertaken in higher education in Britain under the banners of deepening approaches to learning (Gibbs 1992) and negotiated learning or learning contracts (M. Laycock and J. Stephenson 1993, S. Brown and D. Baume 1992).

In different ways, a number of the colleges involved in this study are working around this issue. These include:

- Lambeth College: study skills and study support networks
- Croydon CETS: developing study skills within courses
- Amersham and Wycombe College: study skills for access to caring profession students
- Loughborough College: the learning management time initiative
- Hartlepool College: development of study skills
- Hastings College of Arts & Technology: basic education and study skills
- Grimsby College: development of a Lifelong Learners Project in partnership with one of the local universities, local schools and the LEA
- Solihull College has systematically sought to develop its curriculum and teaching around explicit assumptions about effective learning.

Curriculum structure meets with philosophy of education, theories about learning and teaching strategies at this point. Across the college, strategies of unitising and modularising the curriculum have complemented an emphasis on tutoring and the development of Learning to Learn skills. The latest phase in this development is a project to develop reflective skills underpinning key and subject specific skills for both tutors and students.

The way in which strategies for learning, teaching and curriculum structures complement each other can best be illustrated by reference to a detailed example.

CASE STUDY: CHANGING THE ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT (SOLIHULL COLLEGE)

Four years ago, the department offered a traditional portfolio of engineering courses delivered through a mixture of didactic teaching and workshops.

Student outcomes were also 'traditional' for engineering with low retention and pass rates. With the decline of day release and reduced employment opportunities in engineering, the prognosis was poor.

The college appointed a new Head of Department who is passionately committed to student-centred education and to students having ownership of their learning processes. The department has now changed out of all recognition:

- All lectures have been abandoned; whiteboards and classrooms have disappeared.
- Student learning now occurs in a variety of workshops, resource bases and portfolio rooms.
- Students pursuing different qualification aims, and at different stages in the same qualification, can be found studying together in the workshops.
- Students learn singly and in small groups facilitated by tutors.
- The engineering curriculum has been comprehensively unitised and each unit has a tutor.
- Students have substantial control over their own timetable: some attendances are specified; beyond this, students have considerable freedom constrained only by the opening hours of some of the workshops.
- New resource materials have been generated internally or purchased.
- All students have a personal tutor who has primary responsibility for monitoring and supporting the achievement of the student learning plan.
- GNVQ students initially join a generic programme for the first term before being assigned to a level.
- Staffing is front loaded and particular care is taken in inducting students and in the development of individual learning programmes.
- The flexible curriculum structure facilitates project work and the customisation of training programmes for local companies.

- A variety of tracking sheets are used; all students have a personal file which contains tutorial reports, assignment front sheets and student-generated information.
- Students 'clock in and out' using a password on a computer system.

OUTCOMES

- Retention has improved substantially; the average completion rate for GNVQ engineering courses is over 90%.
- Students feel ownership and commitment; after some initial reservations, teachers have become very committed to the new approach not least because of the evident enthusiasm of their students; employers have been sympathetic, making analogies with their own training practice.
- The college has maintained a broad curriculum offer extending from Foundation GNVQ to franchised degree courses with over 1,000 full- and part-time students.
- Just under three-quarters of the Solihull students are pursuing qualification aims in such small numbers that conventionally taught groups would not be viable.
- Space and equipment utilisation is now more intensive.
- By comparison with the college average, engineering teachers generate over 50% more funding units per teaching hour (before applying FEFC weightings).
- Enrolments can continue throughout the year.

LEARNING TO LEARN: SOME CONCLUSIONS

- The relationship between Learning to Learn strategies and outcomes expressed in terms of completion and achievement rates is not well understood and there is a dearth of systematic research for British further education.
- Some studies, largely drawn from outside the further education sector, suggest nevertheless that the development of Learning to Learn skills will provide an effective component of college retention strategies.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that the consensus around the usefulness of Learning to Learn approaches may be more apparent than real. In particular, apparent agreement around resource-based learning, enhancing student autonomy, increasing flexibility, etc. may conceal a conflict of objectives where efficiency, effectiveness and key skills are opposed to each other.
- In one way or another, many of the project colleges are developing Learning to Learn initiatives as component parts of their overall retention strategies.
- The handful of approaches which privilege and prioritise Learning to Learn within curriculum strategies seem to require a radical break with most accepted conventions about curriculum structure and group teaching strategies.
- In the case of at least one college, however, the developmental costs associated with this sort of radical change had been more than repaid by the outcomes in terms of improved effectiveness and, indeed, efficiency.

10. Curriculum operations

Research on student retention has demonstrated quite consistently that what happens in the experience of learning can make a decisive impact on student decisions to persist or abandon their programmes of study. The same research has demonstrated that issues around the quality of teaching, the helpfulness and accessibility of teachers, quality of feedback, workload pressures, group cohesion and identity are seen by students (both current and withdrawn) as particularly important. What teachers can do with this information may not be immediately obvious. To put the dilemma quite bluntly, are teachers being expected to be better and more caring people, more dynamic and charismatic performers, more disciplinarian, better curriculum designers (whatever any of these terms may mean) ... or what?

Ways of resolving this dilemma are implied throughout the preceding sections of this report. To take the discussion a stage further, we need to look in some detail at two individual college experiences: Plymouth College of Further Education and Knowsley Community College. In both colleges, student retention was assigned a particularly high priority by both Corporations and senior management teams; in both, all teaching teams were encouraged to examine student outcomes against explicit college targets, review the dynamics of their own courses, and develop and experiment with curriculum innovation. There was a small discretionary fund (£20k) available to support development projects at Plymouth (see below, section on Resource Allocation). At Knowsley, support was available mainly through a two person project team (see P. Martinez 1996 for a discussion of the overall approach adopted at Knowsley). In both colleges, teaching teams developed a wide range of responses to issues they had identified and these are presented in the two case studies which follow. The Plymouth case study is drawn from a report on the operation of the discretionary fund and lists a number of projects, their intended purpose and outcomes. The Knowsley examples are drawn from a report on the activity of retention action teams and identify the projects, the issue to be addressed and the chosen solution.

CASE STUDY: CURRICULUM INNOVATION TO IMPROVE RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT (PLYMOUTH COLLEGE OF FURTHER EDUCATION)

Project	Purpose	Outcomes
GNVQ Advanced Health and Social Care	Extra time for fast track students to take advantage of HE offer a year early	3 students fast tracked and benefited
GNVQ Intermediate in IT	Additional Maths support	Algebra grades for 5 out of 6 students higher than original expectation
GNVQ Foundation in Hospitality & Catering	Tutorial time for mandatory unit on pilot programme	46 out of 50 gained full qualification
GNVQ Advanced Construction	Outward bound induction activities	Retention increased in one year from around 70% to over 90%
Arts & Humanities A-level clinics based on mock results	Support 'clinics' based on weak mock results rates	In 7 subjects pass rates improved substantially. In 3 they decreased slightly; in others there was no change
GNVQ Foundation Brickwork and Joinery	Key skills IT additional lecturing support	80% of students successfully completed the external tests in all 3 mandatory units
GNVQ Advanced Built Environment	Additional Maths unit	All students achieved, 3 gaining levels for entry to Civil Engineering Course at university

CASE STUDY: CURRICULUM INNOVATION TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION (KNOWSLEY COLLEGE)

Project	Purpose	Outcomes
The Child Care & Education Certificate	Additional support for assignment preparation development of portfolios and exam preparation	Good External Moderator's assignment preparation.. Report compares well with other colleges running same course; 89% pass rate (first year of qualification)
Psychology A-level 1 year & evening classes	Extra contact hours for tuition and tutoring, study skills required due to considerable course staff turnover	Huge impact on both success and retention
GNVQ Advanced Leisure & Tourism Weekend Residential	To deliver one unit in a concentrated package to improve attention and retention rates	18 students attended, completed unit and programme, all 18 achieved GNVQ Advanced qualification
Mechanical Engineering	Extra tuition to students on science subject causing difficulty	Eleven out of eighteen students passed unit, would have been much lower without funding
BP Hovercraft Challenge GNVQ Intermediate Engineering (Pilot)	To improve retention focusing on major project encapsulating core skills and academic subjects	20 students enrolled, 16 retained, 14 qualified. Predicted outcome without project: 12 retained, 9 qualified. Team awarded the BP Challenge for Youth Design & Build a Hovercraft. £100 prize plus plaque

(P. Taylor, 1996)

Project	Issue	Solution
GCSE Physical Education	Often perceived as a soft option by students (and enrolling staff)	Re-writing the marketing literature to emphasise a minimum level of aptitude for PE and Sport; encouraging enrolling staff to check the suitability of students
Office Technology	Variety of students including school leavers, mature women returners and a small number of men wishing to train in administration; some students may feel out of place, lack confidence or feel uncertain about attending college	Encouraging students to get together in an informal setting to develop their interpersonal skills and generate group cohesion
Mathematics	Significant drop-out from GCSE Maths courses; C&G Numeracy 3750 inappropriateness of having achieved a grade E or less in GCSE maths, for an intensive, one-year GCSE programme	C&G classes and GCSE would be timetabled in parallel, allowing transfer between the two following diagnostic testing in the first few weeks of the course; the diagnostic tests would also determine whether student entered C&G course at level 1, 2 or 3

Project	Issue	Solution
Creative Studies	Creative Studies courses were confused with Leisure courses; problems caused by change of site; Creative Studies courses are expensive due to the need of fabrics, cottons, etc.	Facilities improvement: a new basic level Soft Furnishing & Dressmaking course has been introduced which is a safety net for those who find Creative Studies 7900 too difficult, and a starting point for those with little sewing experience; extended craft options and open learning.
Hairdressing	Students identified lack of structure and restriction in teaching when year 1 and 2 students working together in Realistic Work Environment (RWE)	Return to a more formal method of course delivery; different years are now taught in a structured and sequential manner
Catering	Drop out and low achievement; lack of differentiation to meet needs of different students at same level	Timetabled sessions of Individual Development Programme (IDP) so not only individual pastoral recognition but action planned for assessment in RWE; earlier access to assessment; more recognition of transferable skills; monthly review to allow careful action planning for candidates with problems (domestic or work related) and high achievers

Project	Issue	Solution
Modern Languages	Low motivation and poor use of Language rooms.	Promotion of the use of the bank of resource materials which relate closely to the topics studies within the languages at A-level and GCSE; students supplement their lessons with materials that enhance their linguistic and IT skills, and make them feel more at home working with foreign languages
Office Technology Medical Secretaries/Legal Secretaries	Lack of awareness of career opportunities; low motivation.	Facilities available to students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interactive video • word processing in foreign languages • audio and video materials Visits arranged to stimulate students' interest in the legal system and enable them not only to relate their studies to court procedures and personnel but also to raise their awareness of the wide scope of employment opportunities within the legal profession; similarly, AMSPAR Medical Secretaries have visited a Special Needs Training and Assessment Centre and hosted visits from a number of professional practitioners

The success or failure of the projects on the preceding pages was of course, highly dependent on a complex process of review, diagnosis of issues, planning change and implementation. This can be illustrated by a more detailed case study relating to part-time adults – social, health and community care students at Stockport College.

CASE STUDY: PART-TIME STUDENTS IN SOCIAL, HEALTH AND COMMUNITY CARE (STOCKPORT COLLEGE)

This is one of seventeen schools in a large mixed-economy college of further and higher education. It has approximately 1,000 students most of whom are part time and 55 FTE staff.

School managers have been concerned about retention for some time and for a variety of reasons: lost opportunities, the effects of failure on students who withdraw, the effects on the students who remain, impact on marketing, effect on staff.

The issue was emphasised still further by an inspection which gave the curriculum area a grade 2, but which identified particular issues in relation to retention and achievement. The head of school launched two initiatives in parallel: research and improvement. The research initiative was undertaken with part-time current students who were asked four questions:

- Have you ever considered leaving?
- If yes, which from the list of 20 possible reasons apply? (or any other reasons)
- What helped you to continue? (select all items that apply from a list of 20 or add your own)
- What would you like to see improved? (select from a list or specify your own).

OUTCOMES OF RESEARCH

Seventy-seven completed questionnaires were returned (100% response rate). Many students had considered leaving and most identified four or five reasons. The most significant included:

- problems at work/change of job
- competing commitments and responsibilities
- too much coursework
- difficulties in finding time to study

- problems with study skills
- difficulties in concentrating
- finding the course too difficult.

What had helped students to persist (with the number of times these items were mentioned in brackets) included:

- helpful teachers (56)
- worthwhile qualifications (56)
- friendly teachers (53)
- help with career (52)
- course interesting (49)
- gaining confidence (42)
- help with coursework (41)
- feelings of achievement (37).

IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

The research largely confirmed the strategies which both the college and the head of school had developed with his colleagues including:

- improved information for enquirers
- better market information
- more pro-active marketing
- more sophisticated selection procedures
- guidance and learning support
- introduction of Student Learner Agreement
- improved and upgraded facilities
- provide base rooms/areas
- more systematic induction
- maintain tutorial support
- develop group identity
- support systems
- additional learning support
- chase up absences
- liaison with college student services
- staff appraisal

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- staff development
- value students as individuals.

In addition to these general measures for part time students, specific actions were taken in relation to the first and national certificate courses:

- Managerial roles and accountabilities were clarified.
- Modularisation introduced greater flexibility.
- The transition from year one to year two was improved for the national certificate of students.

OUTCOMES

Percentage retention rates on five courses which cover the range of provision are shown below:

RETENTION RATES: PERCENTAGES				
	1993-4	1994-5	1995-6	1996-7
First Certificate	71	69	69	89
	1992-3	1993-5	1994-6	1995-7
National Certificate	41	35	40	65
Higher National Certificate	83	63	85	89
Diploma Nursing	81	88	81	86
Dip Health Studies Research	63	60	63	66

1996-7 and 1995-7 figures are up to 16/5/97

CURRICULUM OPERATIONS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

These case studies contain a selection of curriculum projects from colleges. I am particularly conscious of the limitation of space in this section. Any one of the curriculum innovations, experiments, pilots and changes presented here could form the basis of a study in its own right. Similar summaries could be drawn up from the other colleges. It may be possible to draw some inferences along the following lines:

- Given an appropriate internal climate and focus, a huge volume of interesting and creative curriculum improvements can be generated to improve student retention.
- The difficulty in prescribing centrally or even anticipating what will work best for a given course team or indeed curriculum area is evidenced by the diversity

of issues and solutions. In this sense, the individual teaching teams are indeed 'the world's greatest experts' in what is appropriate for their students.

- Innovation at operational level will almost certainly be specific to the programme area, to the course and perhaps even to the individual cohort of students.
- Although curriculum innovation goes on all the time, both colleges found that it occurred more rapidly and across a larger number of curriculum teams and had a more specific focus if set within declared and very public college strategies to improve retention.
- The main and probably the most productive emphasis was not so much on the teacher as carer or charismatic performer (although these could be important), but more on the roles of teacher as learning expert, researcher and curriculum designer. This tends to provide independent confirmation from further education for similar conclusions reached in a large scale study in higher education (G. Gibbs, 1992).
- These developments at operational level tend to emphasise the importance of formative and summative evaluation by teaching teams and, hence, the need to gain early feedback from students.

Further very tentative hypotheses are suggested by a brief consideration of two types of project that were not developed either in the mini case studies or, to any great extent, in other colleges participating in the project. The first relates to issues of workload. Research elsewhere suggests that excessive course work demands or poorly scheduled course work can undermine student motivation and confidence in their ability to succeed (P. Martinez, 1995). Equally, research in the parallel project referred to in the introduction suggests that students can be quite outspoken in the criticism of (a minority of) teachers whom they perceive as remote, inaccessible, boring, too authoritarian, too lax, ill prepared and so on. The absence of projects to address either of these issues suggests perhaps that:

- Course teams may be more conservative in their approaches to assessment than in areas of course design or, alternatively, may be (or feel) constrained by the demands of the examining bodies and/or the views of external verifiers and moderators.
- Course teams may find it more difficult, secondly, to be self-critical about the performance and behaviour of individual team members than about issues such as course design which are seen to belong to the whole team.

11. Student support

Support services to students have been introduced in some form in almost every college and adult education service. They are relatively unproblematic. It seems obvious, however, that the increasingly diverse populations of further education students may experience considerable financial and other difficulties during their studies.

The situation is almost certainly deteriorating:

- The availability of local authority discretionary grants has diminished sharply.
- The number and proportion of employer sponsored students have decreased.
- The proportion of older students with child care, caring, and other costs is increasing.

The response of colleges has been to seek to alleviate rather than cure the problems that their students face within the limits of their own (declining) levels of resourcing.

There is substantial anecdotal evidence to suggest that student support measures help many students to complete their programmes of study and are particularly welcomed by students who access the support. The same evidence suggests that personal problems and difficulties, particularly student poverty, affect many students who nevertheless complete their course. It suggests, further, that where personal circumstances (financial hardship, accommodation problems, caring responsibilities, illness, relationship difficulties) contribute to student drop-out rate, they are often mixed up with programme- or college-related issues, for a discussion of research on this point, see P. Martinez, 1995. It is not surprising therefore that student support measures are almost always combined with other types of retention strategy.

The following account is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, but simply records the number and types of student support in colleges.

HELP WITH DIRECT COSTS OF STUDY

Plymouth CFE has developed a local fee remission and college loan system. New students aged 19 or over studying for 15 or more hours per week are encouraged to apply for a government-sponsored Career Development Loan. If they are not eligible, and subject to a means test, the college has an 80/20 tuition fee remission scheme. The student pays 20% and the remaining 80% is deferred until the end of the course. If the student completes his/her course, it is remitted entirely. Plymouth also operates a short-term loan scheme for emergencies which is available to any student: the Principal's Hardship Fund.

All full-time courses are free and related examination fees are remitted at Weston College. Lambeth College is currently operating one of the largest Access funds (in absolute terms) in England. With its last cohort of full time adult students, South East Essex College identified particular problems in providing financial advice, assessing student eligibility for ESF and other funding, processing its own Access fund applications and liaising with external agencies, notably Unemployment Benefit Office and JobCentre staff. The college's solution was to streamline and focus its financial advice service and link this to the administration of its Access fund and fee remission procedures. These functions are now supported and recorded by locally developed software. One of the two key forms (the Access Fund application) is reproduced below to indicate the database fields.

FIGURE 30: ACCESS FUND APPLICATION FORM (SOUTH EAST ESSEX COLLEGE)

South East Essex College		Access Form Number: <input type="text" value="0"/>	
Access Fund Application Form			
SECTION A Personal Details			
First Name: <input type="text"/>		Surname: <input type="text"/>	
Street1: <input type="text"/>			
Street2: <input type="text"/>			
Street3: <input type="text"/>		Street4: <input type="text"/>	
Post Code: <input type="text"/>		Telephone: <input type="text"/> Date of Birth: <input type="text"/>	
COURSE DETAILS - OFFICE USE ONLY			
Student ID: <input type="text"/>		Course Title: <input type="text"/>	
		Course Code: <input type="text"/>	
Team: <input type="text"/>		Mode of Attendance: <input type="text"/>	
		Course Period: <input type="text"/>	
SECTION B Personal Circumstances			
Are you :- Married: <input type="checkbox"/> Single: <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced: <input type="checkbox"/> Separated: <input type="checkbox"/>			
Do you have a partner living with you?: <input type="checkbox"/> (Yes = x No = Blank)			
Number of Children: <input type="text"/> Child 1 age: <input type="text"/> Child 2 age: <input type="text"/> Child 3 age: <input type="text"/> Child 4 age: <input type="text"/>			
Do you live more than 3 miles from College?: <input type="checkbox"/> (Yes = x No = Blank)			
Are you unemployed?: <input type="checkbox"/> (Yes = x No = Blank)			
Are you receiving any benefit?: <input type="checkbox"/> (Yes = x No = Blank)			
SECTION C Family Income			
YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE	Income from your employment:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Partner's income:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	LEA Maintenance award:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Student loan:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Family Credit/Income Support/Child or other benefit?:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Other (please specify):		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Total income per week:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
SECTION D Expenditure (fixed)			
YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE	Rent/Mortgage:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Gas/Electricity:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Water Rates/Council Tax:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Life/Domestic Insurance:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Childcare:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Food:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
	Fares to College:		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>
Total Expenditure (fixed)=		<input type="text" value="£0.00"/>	

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SECTION E Expenditure (variable)	
YOU WILL BE REQUIRED TO PROVIDE EVIDENCE	Books/Stationery: £0.00
	Clothing: £0.00
	Toiletries: £0.00
	Sports and Hobbies: £0.00
	Occasional costs (Birthdays, School trips, etc.): £0.00
	Others (please state): £0.00
Total Expenditure (variable) = £0.00	
AVAILABLE FUNDS	
Weekly surplus/deficit of total income (C), minus total outgoings (D and E) = £0.00	
SECTION F Statement by the Student	
I wish to apply to the Access Fund for: <div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: top; margin-left: 10px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Examination/Registration <input type="checkbox"/> Travel expenses <input type="checkbox"/> Childcare expenses </div>	
The information I have given is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge. Signed: _____ Date: _____	
OFFICE USE ONLY	
Date received: _____ Evidence (fixed): <input type="checkbox"/> Date of interview: _____ Evidence (variable): <input type="checkbox"/> Evidence (income): <input type="checkbox"/> Committee's Recommendations: _____	
FINANCE USE ONLY	
Cheque: <input type="checkbox"/> To be paid to (Name): _____ Cash: <input type="checkbox"/> To the value of: £0.00 College Nursery Fees: <input type="checkbox"/>	
Committee Signature: _____ Date: _____ Approval Signature: _____ Date: _____	
Student: _____ College: _____	
I acknowledge receipt of cheque No./Cash: £0.00 £0.00 Student signature: _____ Date: _____	
I acknowledge receipt of cheque No./Cash: £0.00 £0.00 Student signature: _____ Date: _____	
I acknowledge receipt of cheque No./Cash: £0.00 £0.00 Student signature: _____ Date: _____	

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FINANCIAL ADVICE

Usually in conjunction with specific financial assistance, many larger colleges have created one or more administrative posts to give financial advice. The finance or welfare officers advise on the availability of financial support from a range of sources, including State benefits, Career Development Loans, tax relief, charitable funding, etc. At Plymouth CFE, Study and Money workshops are run most Wednesday afternoons.

LIAISON WITH JOBCENTRES, ETC.

Given the degree of local discretion exercised by JobCentres and Unemployment Benefit Offices, the interpretation of Job Seeker's Allowance and Income Support rules, several colleges report that they have invested time in improving liaison with benefit staff (e.g. South East Essex College). At North Lincolnshire, the college principal has made a point of networking with the regional manager. The college's Adult Guidance Service has worked with JobCentre staff to develop:

- the college's enrolment forms
- a standard letter for students in receipt of JSA to take to the Unemployment Benefit Office
- a working agreement with Job Club staff to negotiate times for students to attend the Job Club without detriment to their programmes of study.

COSTS OF TRAVEL

On average, full-time students at Weston make a round trip of 26 miles each day and public transport is poor after 6p.m. The college has responded with schemes to help with travel costs and by arranging additional buses.

North Lincolnshire College also provides free or subsidised bus passes.

Plymouth CFE offers subsidised travel to all students aged under 19 who live 3 miles or more from college. It runs a network of college buses to complement commercially available services.

CHILD CARE COSTS

Lambeth and North Lincolnshire (along with many other colleges) have expanded their creche provision and support for child care costs.

HEALTH CARE SUPPORT

Plymouth has put in place a self assessment procedure for students to identify health care needs. These are captured at application. After enrolment, students are interviewed by health care officers and their details entered in a medical records database. Information is subsequently circulated to all relevant staff including tutors, first aiders, departmental counsellors, etc.

COUNSELLING SERVICES

Counselling services sometimes run by volunteers but more usually by specialist staff are available in many large colleges. Counsellors are also employed by some sixth-form colleges (e.g. Worthing).

STUDENT SUPPORT: SOME CONCLUSIONS

- The provision of student support is probably the single most widely adopted retention strategy within colleges, but is invariably listed with a variety of other strategies.
- There is substantial anecdotal evidence that student support measures are highly visible, valued by students and help many to complete their programmes of study.
- The difficulties occasioned either directly or indirectly by student poverty are increasing and that financial constraints have frustrated colleges in their efforts to resolve such difficulties.
- Within these constraints, the nature of student support varies very considerably from college to college, with financial support measure being particularly prominent.

12. Student tracking and follow-up

Almost all colleges have been tightening up or streamlining their tracking and follow-up procedures. An overview of attendance registration systems is contained in Barwuah and Walkley (1997). Along with changes to tutoring, and the maintenance and sometimes extension of student support, improvements in student tracking are probably the most commonly applied components of college retention strategies. Three broad approaches have been followed in the sector and these are all represented among the project colleges:

- manual systems
- manual and computerised systems
- computerised systems.

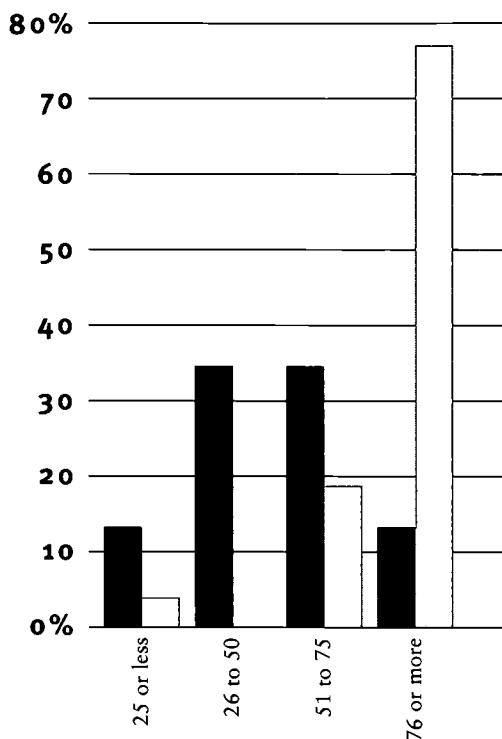
The different approaches all have a common foundation, however: the effective recording of student attendance. This may seem obvious, but to reinforce the point, work done at York College of Further and Higher Education demonstrates quite unequivocally that early withdrawal, particularly for younger students, is closely associated with poor attendance.

Further, as might be expected, this relationship is much less strong for adult students partly because of the more diverse nature of adult student populations, partly because of the conflicting demands on their time (work, family, caring) and partly because of the high motivation among some adult students to achieve professional and work-related qualifications. The analysis conducted at York is set out on the next page:

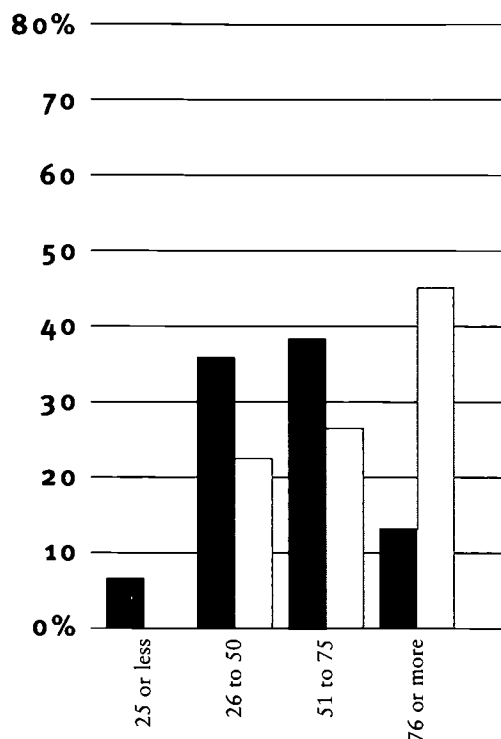
In this section, these different approaches are discussed in more detail and some general conclusions are drawn.

FIGURE 31: AVERAGE ATTENDANCE CHART (YCFHE)

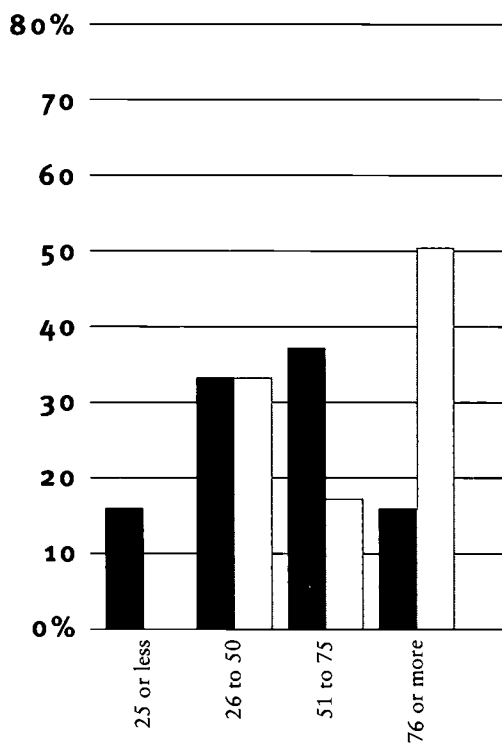
**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
AGE 16 OR UNDER**



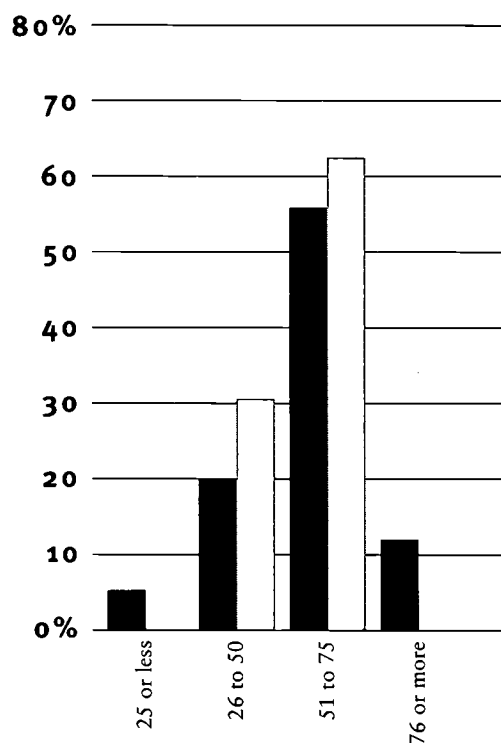
**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
AGE 17-18**



**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
AGE 19-25**



**PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
AGE 26 OR MORE**



Leavers **Persistors**

MANUAL SYSTEMS

Croydon CETS has refined its tracking systems following action research supported by SOLOTEC funding. New attendance monitoring and follow-up systems were introduced across 18 modern language courses involving 35 tutors and over 1200 students. All students were asked to notify their tutor or centre in advance if they were going to miss a session.

To evaluate the effectiveness of closer monitoring and follow-up, tutors were invited to take one of four actions in the event of non-notified absence:

- send a postcard to student
- telephone the student
- telephone and send a card after the second non-notified absence
- take no action.

This was introduced alongside a new modular framework for modern languages, and outcomes were quite dramatic. Drop-out in the first term was halved where the tutor telephoned students immediately after a non-notified absence. The most effective follow-up was by telephone; with little or no difference between sending a card after the first absence and no action.

As a result, the Service proposes to introduce a systematic monitoring and follow-up procedure in the area of languages initially, as illustrated below:

FIGURE 32: MONITORING AND FOLLOW-UP PROCEDURES (CROYDON CETS)

- *All language students will be asked to give prior notification to their tutor or centre office when absence is known in advance.*
- *Where there has been no prior notification, language course tutors must react to the first student absence by telephoning (with sensitivity) during the coffee break, immediately after class, or, if necessary, the next day, to demonstrate that absence has been noticed, that the student has been missed and will be welcomed on return, and to indicate what action, if any, should be taken to 'catch up'. Students who do not attend the first class without prior notification must also be contacted immediately.*
- *The course tutor must send a 'catch up'/reminder card, with class notes if appropriate, immediately following the second consecutive absence, where student notification of absence has not been received.*
- *If there is a fourth consecutive class absence without notification, a dedicated member of the academic or student guidance team should approach the student (by telephone if possible) to enquire into reasons for absence.*
- *A systematic and regularised system for recording drop-out be investigated and introduced into CETS to facilitate collection and interpretation of retention and drop-out statistics.*

(M. Vick, 1997)

The Croydon system clearly relies heavily on tutors. Salford College has a different approach for full-time students. Register clerks have been appointed to each of the four main sites. They examine course registers and produce weekly monitoring reports (see an example below). If a student is absent for 50% or more of sessions in a week, the clerk telephones them.

FIGURE 33: MONITORING REPORT FORM (SALFORD COLLEGE)

SALFORD COLLEGE
WEEKLY MONITORING REGISTER for FULL-TIME courses
FORM AA2

Course Title: _____ No.: _____ Week commencing: _____

REMARKS	No	NAME	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday			
			am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm	am	pm		
	1		1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
	2													
	3													
	4													
	5													
	6													
	7													
	8													
	9													
	10													
	11													
	12													
	13													
	14													
	15													
	16													
	17													
		Class Times												
		Total Present												
		Initials												

Present = / Late = / Absent = 0 Known Absence = K

In the event of continuing student absence, the clerks send a standard letter in week 2 which provides a named contact in Student Services (and is copied to that person). In week 3, a further letter is sent to the student and copied to Student Services. At this point, Student Services have the responsibility of making contact with the student. Finally, in week 4, a withdrawal form is forwarded via the student's tutor to MIS. All these actions are recorded by the clerk in the course register. The clerks also produce a weekly report for management purposes and summaries are produced for the college SMT on a termly basis. This activity not only records the number of students whom the clerks have contacted, by course, but also records details for each course on:

- registers not returned
- registers not marked
- student transfers
- students withdrawn
- new starters
- schemes of work seen and returned to the course team
- schemes of work not seen.

Following the implementation of this system, average weekly attendance on full time courses has risen from 77% to 85%.

Kensington and Chelsea College has adopted another model for ESOL courses which combines closer monitoring, tutor follow-up and elements of a student contract. From September 1996, the strategies adopted in the ESOL area include:

- two full-time staff members who have been identified to oversee registers and operate an early warning system about class numbers
- class attendances are tracked weekly (in part of the college's catchment area)
- tutors phone students who are absent
- a tutor/student contract has been introduced outlining the expectations for and from students; students are made aware through the contract that if they miss a month of college without informing their tutor, they will lose their place on the course (and creche place if allocated)
- new forms to record student addresses had been introduced to try and eliminate confusions over 'untrackable' students (particular issues included some students who are illiterate in their own language or live in 'bed and breakfast' accommodation).

MANUAL/COMPUTERISED SYSTEMS

Grimsby College has retained manual registers but these are input to MIS running on COVTECH software. The input is done each day by data processing clerks and the information which is made available to course teams and managers is never more than 24 hours old.

Worthing Sixth Form College employs a variation to this approach. Registers are kept manually and then scanned into the college's MIS. Attendance monitoring is carried out weekly and reports are directed to tutors. Together with information from ALIS and records of course work and assignments, these provide the main college generated information for tutors to monitor and discuss student progress and, if necessary, initiate follow-up activity.

Specific manual/electronic systems have been developed by colleges support pre-enrolment services and financial advice and assessment for financial support.

It is difficult to generalise about the advantages of partly or fully computerised tracking systems. The issues remain controversial and discussions are to a degree polarised between proponents (usually to be found amongst managers) and sceptics (usually to be found amongst teachers).

There is some evidence, however, that where computerisation has been applied successfully as part of a college retention strategy, and where it is welcomed by teachers, it is usually because it provides an effective aid to monitoring student progress and curriculum review and planning.

Success in this context means that:

- tutors and teachers with responsibilities for monitoring student progress have on-line access to accurate and up-to-date information about their students
- teachers and course teams responsible for course review and planning have access both to their own current information and to relevant comparator information
- their own current information might include:
 - attendance patterns by week, day, session or teacher
 - patterns of transfers and withdrawals over time on a weekly or monthly basis
 - calculation of value added where this is available

- student profile by course or programme at first enquiry, at application, at interview, on course and at completion
- any significant differences between the profile of enrolled and the profile of withdrawn students
- the relationship between target numbers, number of enquiries, number of interviews, applications, enrolments and completions by course or programme.

Useful comparative information might include information to:

- permit year on year comparisons at course or programme level
- compare programme and course performance with departmental or college performance
- compare course or programme performance with those at a similar level, with similar students or from a similar discipline, from elsewhere within the college.

COMPUTERISED SYSTEMS

The advantages and disadvantages of various tracking and attendance monitoring systems are discussed in K. Donovan (1996) and Barwuah and Walkley (1997).

Wilberforce College has purchased around 100 BROMCOM packs to provide an electronic attendance registration system (EARS). The teacher keys in attendance details and these are transmitted immediately to MIS. The benefit of this approach is that information is made available immediately to managers and teachers and, in addition, different reports can be pulled down by individual course teams, departmental heads and senior managers, using a variety of formats. It also provides a platform to monitor patterns of attendance and withdrawal over time and to generate comparator information for both teams and managers. Equally, it provides 'hard' information to support the college's tutorial process and also aggregate reports for strategic monitoring and planning purposes. Almost as a by-product, it drives the college's MIS for external reporting to the Funding Authority.

The down side is that the college found that it took some six months to iron out bugs and a full year to make optimal use of the system. The solution was only partly technical in that systems had to be reviewed and revised and all staff given the authority and training to use the information. A similar strategy has been pursued at Hartlepool where attendance is monitored on a daily basis supported by computerised registration. Follow-up action is based on the terms of a revised student agreement specifying attendance targets. Careers advisers are called in where students break the terms of their agreement through continuing poor attendance. Verbal warnings are given and recorded by the Careers Adviser and copied to the relevant senior lecturer; any subsequent written warning is copied to the head of department.

STUDENT TRACKING: CONCLUSIONS

Based on the experience of project colleges and on over 30 colleges which participated in the parallel project to be reported in December, a number of conclusions can be drawn with some confidence:

- Many colleges are continuing to experience difficulties with their MIS. Anecdotally, the difficulties seem to occur at two levels. Nationally, the rate of change demanded by funding and inspection authorities and the introduction (and revision) of complex, unitised qualifications, have outstripped the ability of many colleges to cope. National level problems are exacerbated within colleges by the costs of administration, management and technology (J. Garratt, I. Pert, 1996; A. Reisenberger and J. Sanders, 1997). In the worst case scenario, the outcome is a complex and time consuming data capture process which appears to be driven by external rather than internal requirements. The predictable outcome in the words of one senior manager is a tracking system that 'takes but does not give'.
- On the other hand, the experience of project colleges suggests quite strongly that improved tracking and follow-up systems are possible without necessarily constructing a sophisticated electronic solution.
- The same experience suggests that colleges have a choice between manual, electronic and mixed systems and that all can be effective. It is too early to be able to make robust generalisations about which approach is most effective, efficient or both. In crude terms, there seems to be a trade off between cost and effectiveness. More sophisticated electronic tracking systems can, potentially, provide far more detailed and relevant information to teachers and managers. The more sophisticated they are, however, the more expensive the cost not only in terms of technology but also in terms of the time required to develop systems and procedures and to train staff to make optimal use of the systems.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests, further, that tracking and follow-up systems need to be implemented with considerable sensitivity, from the student's point of view. On the one hand, students appear to welcome the college's manifest concern for their progress and welfare. This can, however, have a negative side. In one project college, students reported that the attention given to their attendance made the college seem 'worse than school'. At another, tutors found that the beneficial effects on the prompt follow-up of poor attendance lessened over time. In the same college, students who had been absent for some time were required to attend a tutor-led review before they gained readmission to their course. This has met with quite a mixed student reaction!

- One of the most commonly reported causes of frustration stems from discrepancies between the data held centrally within a college and the data held at programme or departmental level. On investigation, this is usually a managerial rather than a technical issue. Some colleges have resolved this issue by introducing procedures to agree and monitor targets (see next section). If it is clear that the monitoring will be based on centrally held data, all concerned will have a stake in ensuring that locally and centrally held data correspond.
- Follow-up systems work best where they are based on clear and well publicised expectations for student and staff behaviours.
- The initial follow-up of poor attendance seems to be most effective where it is made promptly by telephone rather than by letter.
- Whatever tracking system is adopted, finally, it is unlikely to produce the anticipated benefit if it is not accepted as valid by staff. This is more than a general proposition about 'winning hearts and minds'. The quandary which seems to lie at the heart of many problems reported with tracking systems is that they often seem to be meeting the needs of funding authorities or senior managers rather than those of students and teachers. The point can be illustrated by asking a simple question: Does the information required by a given tracking system actually help teachers do their job better? If it provides useful comparator information (for example about performance on similar courses within the college), detects patterns in course attendance and withdrawal which may not be immediately obvious, provides tutors with up-to-date and valid information to help them monitor student progress, and generates information sufficient to monitor the achievement of course targets, the answer is likely to be 'yes'. If it does not, it is likely to be seen more as a hindrance than a help.

13. Resource allocation and target setting

There is a trend in colleges towards devolved management of budgets, business planning (usually associated with targets) and decentralised decision-making. Such measures are sometimes accompanied by an internal resource allocation mechanism which tends to mirror the funding methodology. Thus, a full time engineering student will imply a higher level of resourcing than an equivalent humanities student.

One of the project colleges has developed a quite robust internal resource allocation system based on targets. Another has refined its processes for setting targets and has introduced an additional incentive designed specifically to improve student retention and achievement.

Barnet College provides an example of the first approach. The general principles applied in the college are that resources should be distributed on an equitable basis, should reflect the performance of programme areas and should encourage the achievement of college targets.

CASE STUDY: RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND TARGET SETTING (BARNET COLLEGE)

- The college is located on the outskirts of London. It has grown substantially since incorporation to some 2,600 full-time and 8,500 part-time students (1996/7). The college budget is around £12m and the ALF is £17.00 per unit.
- The current resource allocation system was established in 1995/6 for all full-time FEFC-funded students.
- The system assumes a college norm of 19 students in each first year group and 17 in each second year group and provides a mechanism for allocating teaching hours between programme areas (each comprising three course groups). There are over 40 such programme areas.
- The norm for teaching hours is set as 648 per group (i.e. 18 hours per week over 36 weeks). This norm includes both teaching and tutorial hours. There is no increase in teaching hours for more highly weighted curriculum areas. Increased costs in such areas are met through differential weighting of materials and equipment budgets.
- Variations at group level are moderated through the programme areas. Achievement above target in one course group can be offset against under achievement in another, within the same programme area.

- Programme areas receive £120 per term for every student in excess of the target norms. Equally, they lose half an hour for each week (calculated on a termly basis) for each student under target. Examples are given below.

UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT OF TARGET

Programme areas lose half an hour per student per term over a whole year.

	Target	Actual	Difference	Hours
Group 1	19	18	-1	630 (17.5 x 36)
Group 2	19	17	-2	612 (17 x 36)
Group 3	17	14	-3	594 (16.5 x 36)
Total	55	49	-6	1836

Reduction in teaching hours available – 108

OVER-ACHIEVEMENT OF TARGET

Programme areas gain £120 per term, per student over target

Maximum staffing allowance

	Target	Actual	Difference
Group 1	19	21	+2
Group 2	19	18	-1
Group 3	17	17	0
Total	55	56	+1

Hours allocated - maximum 648

Additional allocation – £120 per term – 1 over target

The college also assumes that one student will leave a course group during both spring and summer terms. Withdrawal of teaching hours only occurs, therefore, if group numbers during year 1 drop below 18 in term 2 and 17 in term 3. An example is given in the following table.

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TERMLY ADJUSTMENTS

Drop-out of one student per term allowed for:

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
Target	19	18	17
Actual	19	17	17
Difference	0	-1	0

Funding $(18 \times 12) + (17.5 \times 12) + (18 \times 12) = 642$ hours

While hiring and firing decisions for full time staff are made by the college, programme areas have considerable discretion in recruiting and employing part-time staff. Programme areas may apply cash surpluses generated by over achievement of targets as they wish and can carry over such surpluses to the next financial year.

There are a few variations to the norms described above:

- new full-time courses (e.g. GNVQ pilots) are guaranteed their 648 teaching hours
- the target group size for foundation level courses is reduced to 16
- fast-track students who enter year 2 count double
- full time A-level students count as 1 irrespective of the number of A-levels included in their programme
- if group numbers fall below 50% of target, groups may be amalgamated.

Other courses are treated somewhat differently:

- targets are set for all courses
- non-schedule 2 courses have to demonstrate that they are self-financing
- teaching hours for FEFC part-time courses depend on the income generated (funding authority and fees) which is converted into teaching hours.

OUTCOMES

- Overall student retention rates improved from 81% to 91% over one year.
- The mechanism has encouraged a strong focus on enrolment and retention.
- Programme areas have made creative use of available teaching hours and, in some cases, have banked hours in order to support particular students later on.
- The standardisation of teaching hours between curriculum areas has not led to different retention rates.
- There have been many more gainers (through over achievement of target) than losers (through under achievement).
- Programme area heads have a strong incentive to ensure that centrally held MIS records are accurate.
- All-year recruitment and the recruitment of fast-track students have been encouraged.

Longer term evaluations have yet to take place. College managers have noted some initial difficulties in respect of staffing changes between full- and part-time staff and will be monitoring student outcomes carefully to ensure that the pressure to meet targets does not result in inappropriate recruitment.

Plymouth CFE has implemented a different approach comprising a robust mechanism for setting targets and an incentive fund to develop curriculum innovation.

Within a framework of college targets set by the corporation, programme teams set targets for attendance, retention and achievement. These are agreed with their head of department and reported to a sub-committee of the academic board.

The target and subsequent performance data are aggregated at departmental level and reported each half term to the principalship and corporation.

Programme teams are required to report to the vice-principal if attendance falls 15% or more below target. Also, against the indicators of recruitment, retention and achievement, the four best and four worst performing programme areas are identified and reviewed by the vice-principal, both to identify what has worked particularly well and to understand and resolve any specific problems.

The declared intention embodied in this process is to improve college provision rather than allocate blame. To make this point explicit, the preamble to the programme logs within which each team records its performance and key data reads as follows:

PROGRAMME LOG: A NOTE ON TARGETS (PLYMOUTH CFE)

By inviting programme teams to set targets, it is intended that a common awareness of the college's goals should be promoted and reinforced.

There is much evidence to indicate that the very process of setting targets and evaluating one's own performance in relation to them does in fact lead to improved success. Furthermore, it is also argued that where those who are charged with meeting targets are directly involved in setting them, then not only is success likely to be improved, but also the targets aimed for are likely to be more challenging.

Notwithstanding the above, however, it must be recognised that the achievement or non-achievement of targets can never be ascribed to any one element of the 'delivery' system, be it the lecturer, the equipment, the accommodation, to name but a few possible variables. Any system will contain within it inherent variability which can only be reduced by improving the system. One must therefore be very cautious in interpreting any measure of any one element's performance against a target which is static and which cannot reflect the inherent variability of the system it represents.

However, it is important to use the information available to seek to arrive at knowledge as to how the system is performing, and how it could be improved. Such knowledge can only be arrived at where groups of people share their experiences and insights into the different aspects of the system in an open, constructive way. It is intended that the Programme and Services Management Policies should promote such an approach.

The complementary mechanism developed at Plymouth is the Key Statement Fund. This is a budget of £20k held by the VP. Programme teams bid directly identifying:

- *amount required*
- *nature of activity*
- *expected improvements which are quantified.*

The allocation criteria are quite flexible and it is accepted that some projects may fail. The main criteria are appropriateness to improve student outcomes. Evidence of some formative assessment of the group or individuals for whom the help is targeted should accompany the bids. Imaginative and innovative ideas are particularly welcome as are bids where student learning has been interrupted by staff turnover or illness. Financial support to students is excluded as are bids for equipment or curriculum development which should fall more appropriately within existing budgets.

All of the curriculum innovations developed at Plymouth were supported by Key Statement Funding. The college is confident that this relatively small budget has helped both to encourage staff and to generate additional income far in excess of its cost.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND TARGET SETTING: SOME CONCLUSIONS

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the merits of devolved budgets, reorganisation into business units or caseloading. Indeed, these more general issues are explored at some length in Carroll, 1996. What does seem reasonably clear in relation to retention is that:

- Colleges' resource allocation models need to be congruent with, and support, their retention strategies.
- On this basis, they will almost certainly involve distribution formulae which mirror in some way the basis on which colleges are themselves funded; in other words, funding will follow students.
- Retention targets at an institutional level may well provide a significant political message and spur to strategic managers. They will need to be supplemented by additional mechanisms if they are to be effective at programme team level, however.
- From the experience of the project colleges, these additional mechanisms could take the form either of resourcing norms or of targets to be negotiated between programme teams and heads of department.
- Relatively small but carefully targeted curriculum development budgets can provide powerful stimuli to curriculum innovation and experiment within the framework of improving student retention.

14. Conclusions

Suspending for a moment the discussion of detailed conclusions, several general inferences can be drawn.

The strategies reviewed here provide compelling evidence that student persistence and drop-out are significantly influenced by the experience of study and learning and that colleges and adult education services can improve retention rates.

Successful strategies are very diverse. Certain broad themes can be identified and, indeed, provide the chapter headings for this guide. The priority and relevance of any individual theme will vary from institution to institution.

The devil is indeed in the detail. Even where colleges prioritise the same issues and adopt apparently similar approaches, they need to develop local models which fit the circumstances of their history, mission, student profile and programme portfolio. Indeed, the richness and diversity of programme level initiatives even within fully articulated cross-college strategies, indicate that there will be substantial diversity even within the same institution.

In the main, colleges and services which have achieved the most significant improvements have linked a 'bottom-up' with a 'top-down' approach. Features of the latter include public commitment from senior managers and college governors (Elected Members in adult education services), prioritising student retention within the organisation's strategic objectives and plans, and using managerial attention, time and energy.

If retention strategies differ from one institution to another, the process through which they have been developed seems to be remarkably similar:

- acknowledgement of student non-completion as an issue
- investigation of the specific local causes for non-completion
- the development and application of retention strategies across the whole or part of the organisation
- evaluation of progress and demonstrable success in improving completion rates
- continuing development of retention strategies.

In terms of more specific conclusions, these are perhaps more tenuous. Our sample is relatively small; research, action research and improvement strategies in this area are quite new; college contexts are many and diverse. Readers are therefore referred to the main body of the guide for a more detailed discussion of conclusions. The following points provide a summary of this more detailed discussion.

MANAGEMENT OF PROCESS

College-wide retention strategies need to be led by strategic curriculum managers.

Project development approaches need carefully constructed project teams and clear and realistic objectives.

The most successful strategies secure a good 'fit' with college structures, processes and people.

PRE-ENROLMENT SERVICES

Entry criteria need to be clear and appropriate.

Programme and course information materials should be designed from the point of view of intended students.

Specialist adult guidance services may well be necessary.

Colleges need to monitor student progress from initial point of contact to course completion and beyond.

Effective pre-enrolment systems improve planning, student placement and market intelligence and reduce drop-out prior to enrolment.

INITIAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Colleges need to provide an initial screening and assessment process linked to appropriate additional support.

Initial screening assists in curriculum planning, in student placement and in the development of learning plans.

Colleges need to complement generic assessment with module- or programme-specific assessment.

Initial screening will not be effective unless it is followed up through support to students and through changes to curriculum structures and processes.

AT-RISK STUDENTS

Certain groups of students are at greater risk of dropping out.

It is important to analyse MIS data to look for demographic patterns of student withdrawal in order to identify local at-risk criteria.

Variations in demographic factors are less significant, however, than variations between and within colleges with similar groups of students.

Colleges need to establish local criteria (demographic, behavioural or attitudinal) to identify at risk students and develop appropriate responses.

More systematic use of formative and summative evaluation (focus groups, whole group discussions, surveys) can help to identify students and courses at risk.

INDUCTION AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

Induction is important for both full and part-time students and should be regarded as a process rather than as an event.

It should include activities such as group forming, raising expectations, motivating and encouraging students, opportunities for early success and the provision of support for late entrants.

Induction processes should blend imperceptibly with the start of the programme of study.

TUTORING

Tutors will also be the co-ordinator and sometimes the deliverer of support for basic education and key skills.

Colleges need to be clear about tutorial requirements, role and person specifications and programmes of tutorial activity.

Student entitlement to tutoring needs to be clear.

Changes to tutoring systems need to be supported by tutor development programmes.

CURRICULUM STRATEGIES FOR RETENTION

Curricula should be audited against criteria of breadth, depth, progression and flexibility.

Colleges may need to develop new sorts of course or programme which will include: introductory courses, modular and unitised courses, courses to develop basic and/or study skills, new course at entry or foundation level and courses which deepen, broaden or otherwise extend the curriculum portfolio.

Modular and/or unitised curricula can help to improve student retention. From student perspective, the main benefits are more achievable learning tasks, more manageable assessments, greater flexibility and choice and enhanced motivation.

Mentoring and peer support mechanisms motivate students and reinforce their sense of belonging.

Learning support will, ideally, be integrated with the course or programme of study.

Where learning is made available in addition to and outside the course or programme, colleges will need to establish or tighten up referral mechanisms.

There is evidence from some colleges that Learning to Learn approaches provide an effective component of college retention strategies.

Approaches which prioritise Learning to Learn require a radical break with many accepted conventions about curriculum structure and group teaching.

CURRICULUM OPERATIONS

Colleges need to provide an internal climate and focus to stimulate curriculum improvement.

Innovation at operational level will be specific to the programme area, to the course and perhaps even to the individual cohort of students.

Since retention issues are so context specific, the activity of teacher and teaching teams is critical.

Curriculum innovation to improve retention will occur more rapidly and more effectively within a framework of a college strategy.

Formative and summative evaluation and review by teaching teams is crucial.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Providing student support is probably the single most widely adopted retention strategy within colleges but is invariably linked with a variety of other strategies.

Student support measures are highly visible, valued by students and help many of them to complete.

The difficulties occasioned directly or indirectly by student poverty are increasing.

STUDENT TRACKING AND FOLLOW-UP

Improved tracking and follow-up systems are possible without necessarily constructing a sophisticated electronic system.

More sophisticated systems can, however, provide far more detailed and relevant information to teachers and managers.

Tracking and follow-up systems need to be implemented with great sensitivity.

Monitoring achievement of targets needs to be done against an agreed set of data.

Follow-up systems work best where they are premised on clear and well publicised expectations for student and staff behaviours.

Telephone follow-up of non-notified absence is more effective than letters.

MIS systems need to satisfy teachers' needs as well as managers' and external stakeholders'. They need information on student progress, patterns of attendance and withdrawal, and comparator information for reviewing their own activity.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Resource allocation models need to be congruent with and support retention strategies.

On this basis, funding will almost certainly follow students.

Retention targets at an institutional level need to be supplemented either by resourcing norms or targets agreed at the departmental or programme level.

Relatively small but carefully targeted curriculum development budgets can provide powerful stimuli for curriculum innovation and experiment within a framework of improving student retention.

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widening

participation

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